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FANGORIA

VOL 2 #29

On the Set: **I Was a Zombie in TINA ROMERO'S QUEENS OF THE DEAD**

BLACK PHONE 2: THE GRABBER CALLS BACK

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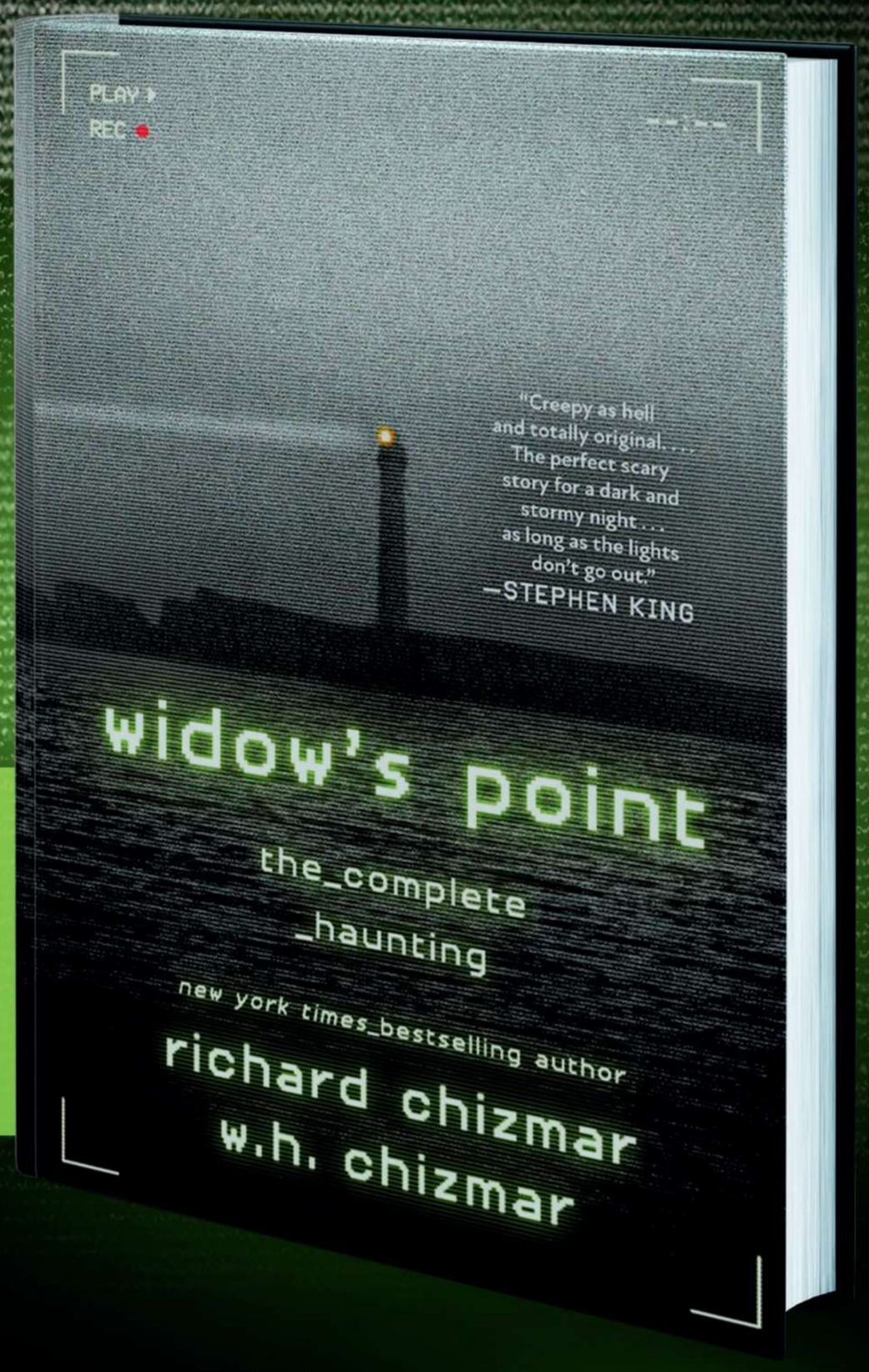
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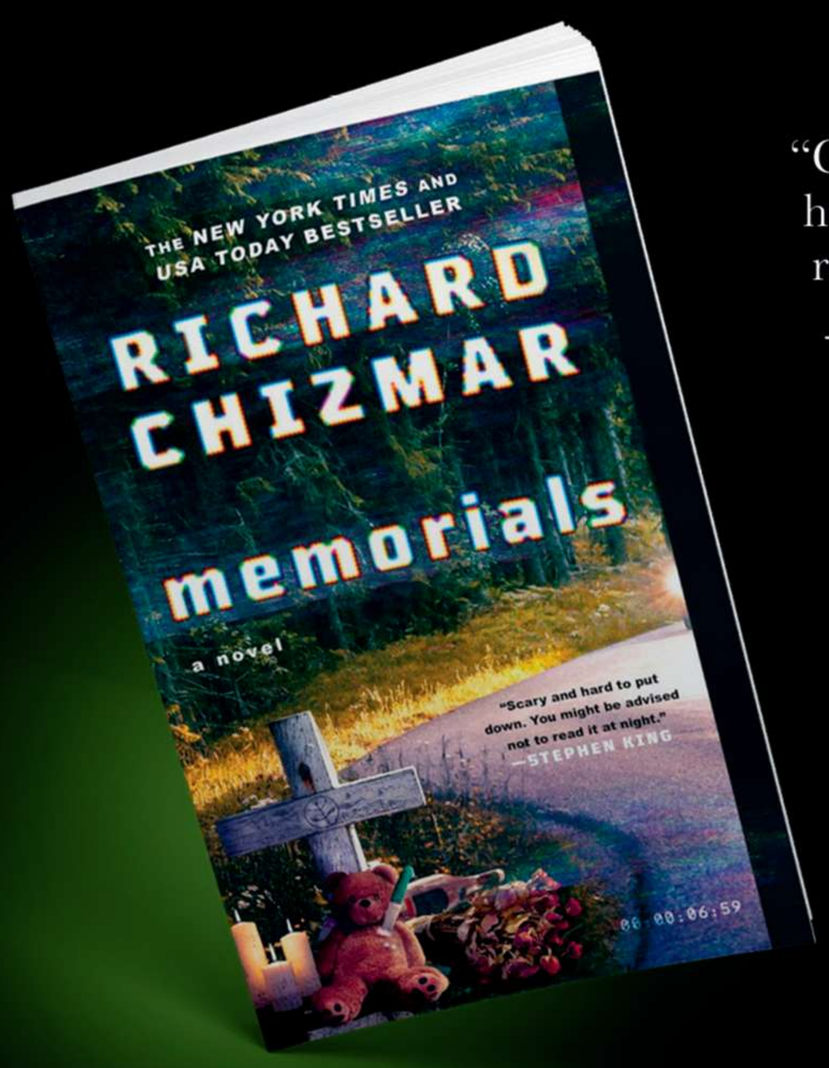
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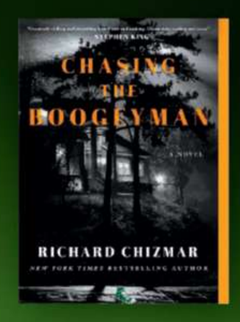

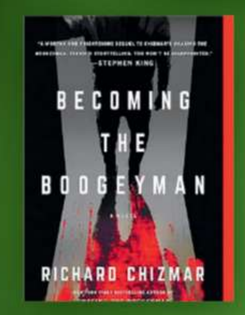

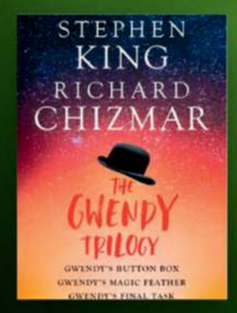

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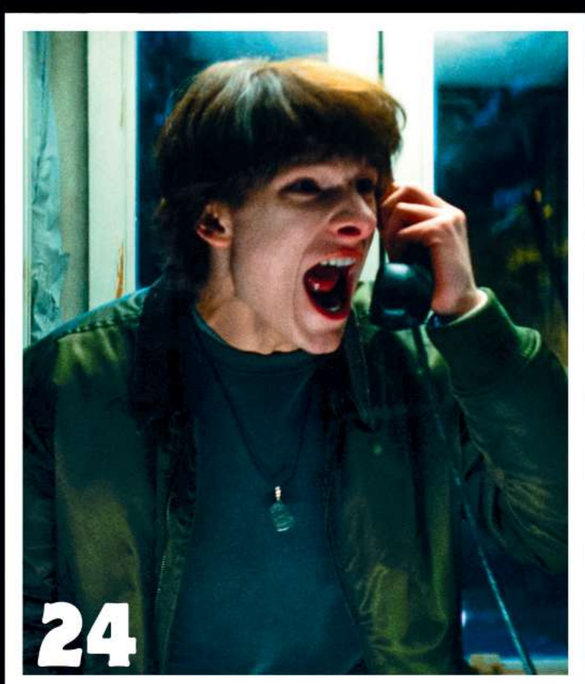

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INVOCATION

ROMERO LIVES!

If you're reading the subscriber edition of this issue, on your way to this page you no doubt clocked the *Queens of the Dead* cover that hearkens back to the classic *Day of the Dead* cover story from Volume 1, issue 43 in 1985. It's one of my proudest covers for a few reasons (not the least of which is honoring late Fango editor Bob Martin), and I don't need to tell you I passed over much higher profile releases to give the cover to Tina Romero's debut feature.

'DAY OF THE DEAD' • 'HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL'
FANGORIA
On the Set: I Was a Zombie in 'DAY OF THE DEAD'!
"SCREAM GREATS" PULL-OUT POSTER #16 'CREEPSHOW'

PREDATOR: BADLANDS • THE RUNNING MAN
FANGORIA
On the Set: I Was a Zombie in QUEENS of the DEAD
"SCREAM GREATS" GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S FRANKENSTEIN

If you were around for my very first issue (v2, #1) back in 2018, firstly: hey thanks for sticking around! Secondly, you might have read in that issue about my initial meeting with Tina Romero as I attended the Living Dead Weekend at the Monroeville Mall — the first such gathering after the death of the great George A. Romero. Though nothing about her impending filmmaking career was discussed, I clocked Tina as someone who was as fiercely protective of her dad's legacy as she was determined to not be hemmed in by it.

Six years later, I found myself (along with Fango contributor/cover ghoul Xero Gravity) on the set of Tina's film, and though a set visit is no indicator of a film's quality, I saw Tina's mom Christine seated by the monitors; I saw a box of gore and entrails Greg Nicotero sent along; I heard about the Tom Savini cameo; I took all this in and had a good feeling, and that feeling was vindicated when I watched *Queens of the Dead* a year later at the Tribeca Film Festival. Gory? No one gets ripped in half, but there's an extended plot point (and an end credits song) about an axe wound. Is it too silly? I'll remind you that Romero stopped the third act of *Dawn of the Dead* to present an old-fashioned pie fight. Social commentary? Duh. *Queens of the Dead* might be steeped in queer and drag culture, but it's a Romero Zombie Movie through and through.

In the years since his passing, lots of folks — well-intentioned and otherwise — have made various overtures about being the heir to George Romero's throne; Tina simply got to work and made a movie that not only honors her dad in ways that made me emotional, but which veers off the beaten path in wild and unexpected ways, blazing a new trail of sequins, glitter and blood. It's a movie Tina should be proud of, that her father would certainly be proud of, and that we are immensely proud to put on our cover.

(And if you bought the newsstand cover, hey, all good! The *Queens of the Dead* set visit is still yours for the enjoyin', and *Predator: Badlands* looks pretty dope, too.)

Phil Nobile Jr., Editor-in-Chief

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TRICK OR TREAT! IT'S A DARK HORSE

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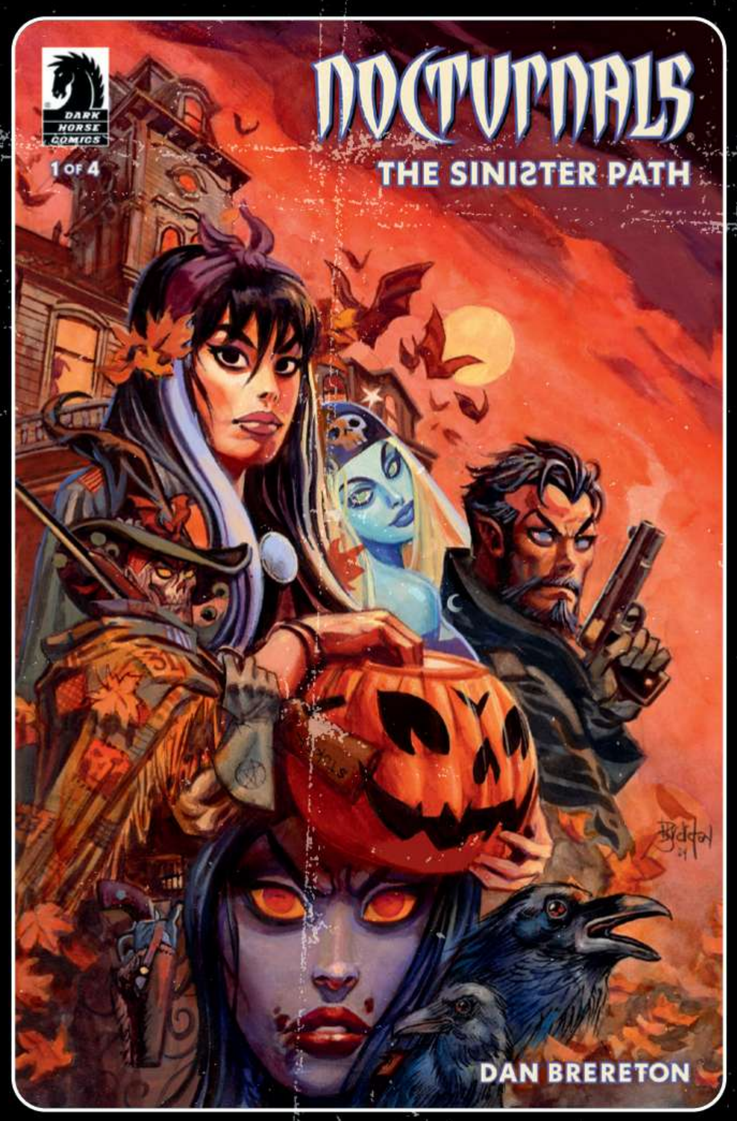

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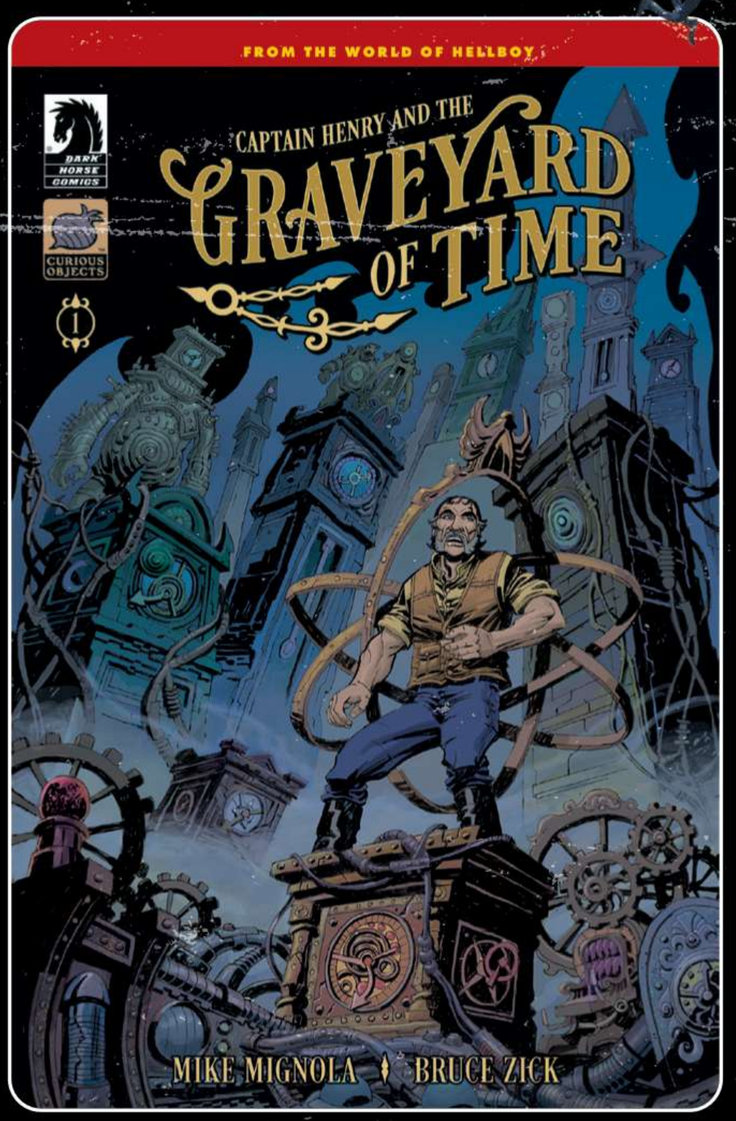

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MONSTER INVASION

The *Five Nights at Freddy's* film adaptation slaughtered box office expectations, proving once and for all that the next generation of horror fans is here and ready for films that appeal to *their* sacred cows, rather than reheated versions of those that scared their parents. With its delicious blend of warped nostalgia, psychological terror, and pitch-perfect character designs, *Five Nights at Freddy's* captured the twisted charm that made the game a cult phenomenon and became the biggest box office hit for Blumhouse ever. It wasn't just a victory for Freddy Fazbear and those who love the twisted (albeit convoluted) world created by Scott Cawthon; with its massive success, the pizza parlor doors could now creak open for a cinematic universe where childhood fears are free to roam... and kill.

Even more impressive, the triumphant performance occurred despite the day-and-date release (a simultaneous streaming and theatrical release), and without a premiere or press tour featuring any of the actors due to the SAG-AFTRA strikes. All it took was a rabid fanbase and an audience's curious desire to see a gaggle of possessed animatronics (with the corpses of children rotting inside of them) wreak havoc. A sequel was inevitable, but as director Emma Tammi tells FANGORIA, the strong numbers out of opening weekend solidified the decision to "get the band back together," and start absorbing the fans' input on what they wanted to see next.

"We were already inheriting new characters for the sequel, because we were taking all the animatronics from *Five Nights at Freddy's 2* [the game] and incorporating them into the film, so that, in and of itself, kind of mandated a scale-up, because there's... quite a few more," Tammi teases. "And I'm saying that lightly," she adds. "There's a lot more than there was in the first game and movie." As is the case with most sequels, there was a budget

PHOTOS COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL PICTURES

THE MALEVOLENT ANIMATRONICS KEEP COMING – AND KILLING – IN *FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S 2.*

increase, a necessity considering the additional animatronics and the fact that they will have all been brought to life by Jim Henson's Creature Shop.

"We'd already learned so much from the first round of the original designs, and we were just able to keep reinventing, but still take all of that knowledge and all the incredible work that Henson's workshop had done [...] but the new designs necessitated reinventing quite a lot and figuring out a bunch of new things as well, which was also incredibly exciting," Tammi explains. While she won't tell FANGORIA which animatronic was the biggest undertaking, she does tell us that one of the new characters required up to thirteen different performers or puppeteers to maneuver it at times. "It was a mammoth task, and everyone was just very excited to rise to the occasion and challenge."

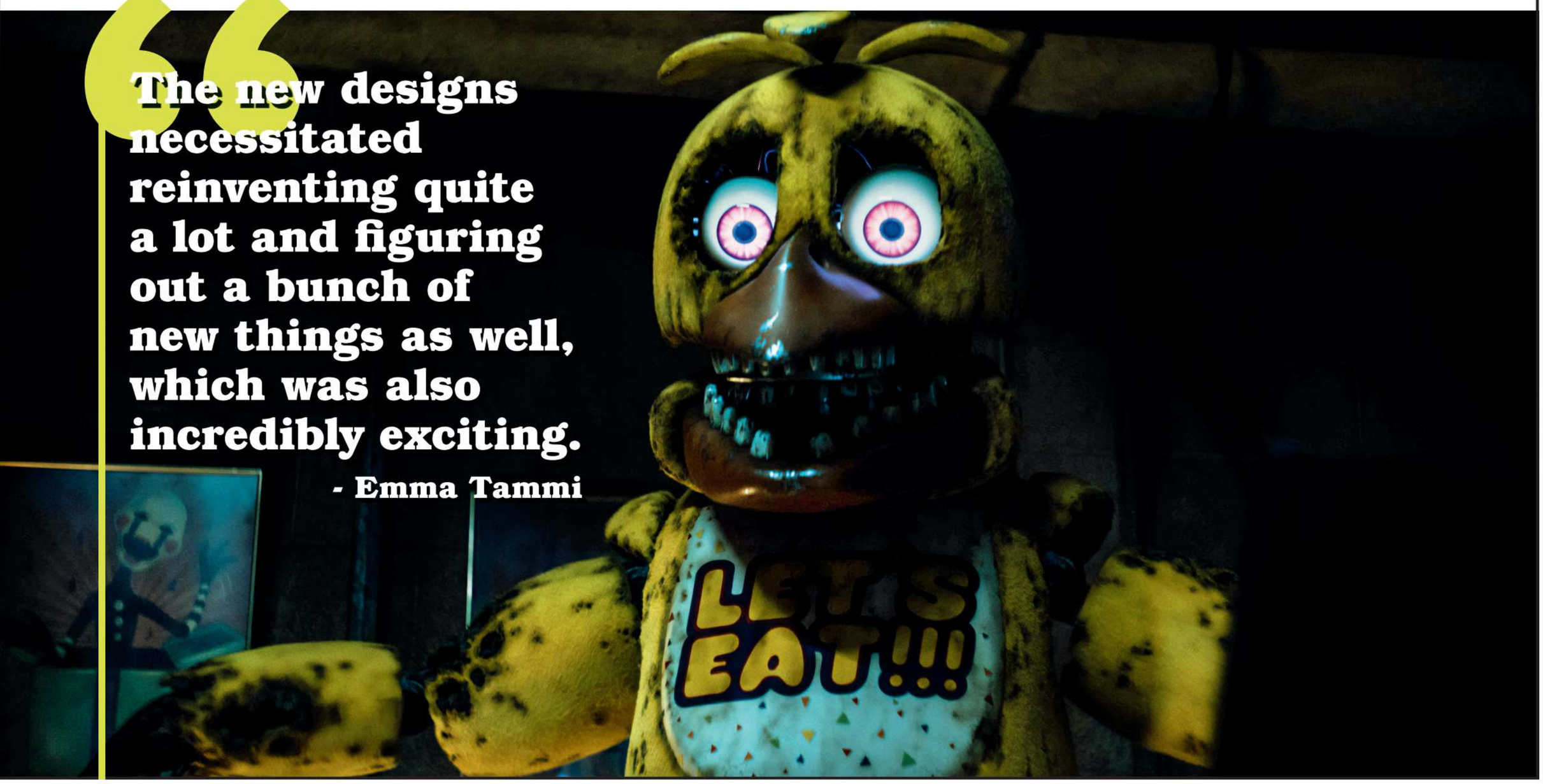
While Freddy, Foxy, Chica, and Bonnie remain the blood-soaked heart of the franchise, *Five Nights at Freddy's 2* sneaks in a mini-*Scream* reunion: Skeet Ulrich joins Matthew Lillard, who reprises his role as resident creep-in-chief, William Afton. Universal and Blumhouse are currently keeping Ulrich's character under wraps, but that hasn't stopped Redditors from theorizing until their fingertips bleed. Tammi credits Cawthon for first floating Ulrich's name, with Lillard's excitement sealing the deal.

"Skeet came on with so much excitement, not only to be reunited, but [to be] in a new franchise with Matt. He really dug deep into the character that he plays," Tammi says. "He found such depth and humanity in the performance, and I'm very excited for people to see him in this film."

Returning cast, alongside the aforementioned Lillard, include Josh Hutcherson as long-suffering Mike Schmidt, Elizabeth Lail as Vanessa Shelly (William Afton's daughter, naturally), and Piper Rubio as Mike's younger sister, Abby. "Everyone's moved on a little bit since the first movie," says Tammi, "or so they think." Mike and Vanessa are clinging to normalcy

"The new designs necessitated reinventing quite a lot and figuring out a bunch of new things as well, which was also incredibly exciting."

- Emma Tammi



ALWAYS WATCHING... ALWAYS WAITING.

after the horrors of the first film. But Abby? She's facing a new home, a new school, and still missing her friends. Which, of course, means the adorable, homicidal robots.

In the years between shoots, Tammi says Rubio went full *Five Night at Freddy's* fanatic, diving into the lore like a seasoned game theorist spiraling down a YouTube rabbit hole. "All she wants to do is talk to anyone and everyone about it all day, so I think her coming into this one with all the excitement that she has as a fan was also just so fun and special for her this round," she says. "That was a really cool thing to witness." For a fandom as vast and fervent as *Five Night at Freddy's*, the idea that one of the film's stars has become one of their own is sure to hit like a jumpscare — only, you know, wholesome.

"There's such a huge community around *Five Nights at Freddy's* that involving them as much as possible is key and feels like a no-brainer in hindsight," Tammi says. From the jump, Scott Cawthon and Blumhouse made fan engagement a priority. Streamer cameos and music from The Living Tombstone weren't just winks; they were offerings to the cult that made the franchise what it is.

For *Ghostbusters* and *Scream 7* star Mckenna Grace, she didn't wait for an invite; she hunted one down, reaching out directly to Cawthon and Tammi with the enthusiasm of someone who's logged too many late-night shifts at Freddy Fazbear's Pizza, practically begging to be a part of the sequel. The team was more than happy to have her, joining *Final Destination Bloodlines* and *Chucky* star Teo Briones as a paranormal investigator in the film. "Having those talented people who are part of that community be a part of the film adds such an amazing energy on set, and I think it translates through the screen," says Tammi.

"I can't speak to other franchises, but I highly recommend engaging the community for any game adaptations because, for us anyway, it's been such an additive." While we're still a few months away from *Five Nights at Freddy's 2* terrorizing theaters, it's clear that Freddy's not just sticking around for five nights anymore. He's here to stay.

"Fingers crossed," Tammi says through a smile, "Maybe we'll get to make one more."

JOSH HUTCHERSON (AS MIKE) CONFERS WITH DIRECTOR EMMA TAMMI ON THE PROPER DRAMATIC MOTIVATION FOR BEING TERRORIZED BY EVIL ANIMATRONIC ANIMALS.

PHOTO BY RYAN GREEN

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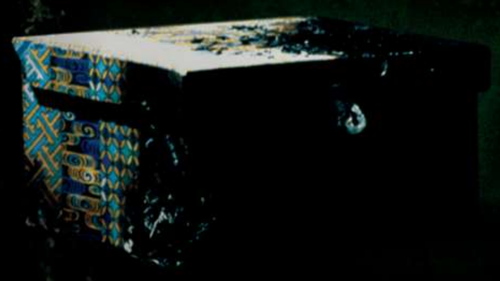

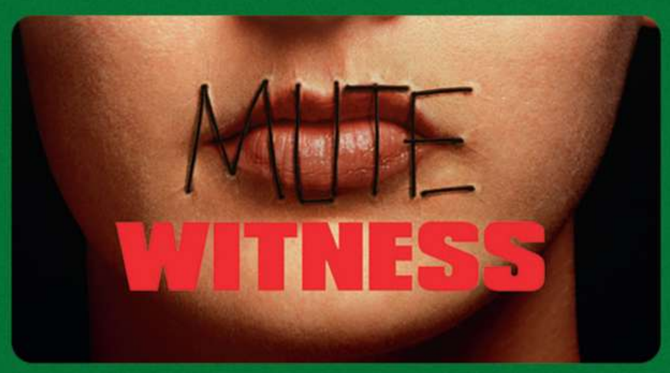

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PORTRAIT OF A SERIAL ARTIST

SCOTT GRACHEFF'S *HOW DARK MY LOVE* TAKES AS ITS SUBJECT ARTIST JOE COLEMAN.

I first became aware of the art of Joe Coleman during the early days of my FANGORIA editorship, circa 1986. A glossy flier for *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* came in the morning mail, along with a VHS copy of the movie. That graphic color leaflet, with the immortal tagline, "Yeah, I killed my Mama," set the tone of the sleepless night to come after I popped that tape into my VCR. Coleman had horrifically captured the verité violence of John McNaughton's disturbing film.

Coleman is now the subject of *How Dark My Love*, the Tribeca Film Festival-winning documentary that digs deep into this artist's life, loves and creative process.

Coleman's obsessions and subjects include notorious murderers, carnies and even *Freaks* director Tod Browning. Filmmaker Scott Gracheff spent over a dozen years intimately charting Coleman's background, from his punk rock days to rodent-eating performance art shows to past drug addiction to his rise as one of the top artists of the macabre and unusual. In the last few decades, Coleman's wife, photographer Whitney Ward, has served as his muse. Their relationship inspired the creation of his massive biographical piece, *Doorway to Whitney*, which took Coleman four years to paint and serves as a connecting theme in *How Dark My Love*.

Though his interests have always plumbed the grimmest aspects of human nature, *How Dark My Love* reveals Coleman to be a bit of a softie, and his loving bond with Ward is very touching. Coleman realized that only the most sensitive collaborators would be capable of telling his story honestly.

"The most important thing in the experience of making this has been the degree of intimacy that both Whitney and I developed with the director and the entire crew," Coleman says. "This came to be achieved slowly, sometimes painfully, over the twelve years of shooting. The vulnerable things that we shared through the camera's gaze were possible only because it was in the hands of a trusted friend and brother. We all became a family. So much so that when Scott asked his now-wife Brianna Wanlass for her hand in marriage, they asked that I perform the ceremony."

Many directors have wanted to use Coleman as the focus of their documentaries. Robert-Adrian Pejo got there first with 1997's *R.I.P., Rest in Pieces*. Others have desired to further document Coleman's captivating life in even greater detail.

"I thought about a couple of filmmakers before and was approached

PHOTOS BY GREGG DE DOMENICO, COURTESY OF *HOW DARK MY LOVE*

by some, but didn't feel it was right at that time," Coleman says. "Then in 2011, Whitney and I met [*How Dark My Love* producer] Jim Muscarella at a concert, and he proposed the idea of doing this documentary. We had an immediate bond with him. He eventually introduced us to Scott Gracheff. I spent a wonderful night discussing movies with Scott, and when he perked up on the subject of one of my all-time favorite actors, Robert Ryan, I knew in my gut he was the right guy."

"Jim was passionate about producing a documentary, so he introduced me to Joe at a wild night at the Friars Club in 2012," Gracheff recalls. "At that point, I was not familiar with the entire breadth of Joe's work, but had always loved a certain painting of his, a small portrait of Robert Ryan, which highlighted the experience of Robert dying of cancer while filming 1973's *The Iceman Cometh*."

While embarking on his long journey to catalog Coleman's colorful life, a guiding theme slowly emerged. This wouldn't be just a documentary solely interested in exploiting the more extreme nature and background of its subject. Instead, an unconventional romance emerged out of the hours of footage to give the doc focus.

"Joe is a visionary artist, and we knew he would be a fascinating character," Gracheff says. "But when we started filming, we weren't exactly sure what the story would be. As we were not interested in creating

WHITNEY WARD AND JOE COLEMAN IN LOS ANGELES.

a traditional artist biopic, we were looking for an interesting storytelling angle that would give us the opportunity to engage viewers on an emotional and visceral level. After a few years of filming, it became clear that Whitney was the key."

"She is a fascinating and lovable person with a compelling life journey, so clearly establishing her as the other main character gave us the inspiration to frame this film as a love story, with the creation of the Whitney portrait as the narrative through-line. This was an exciting creative moment for us as we felt that engaging the viewer with an iconic yet darkly unique love story was also key to reaching a wide audience far beyond that of a cult fan base."

When asked to cite the most surprising thing he learned about Coleman while shadowing him during the epic-length shoot, Gracheff pauses.

"That's a tough question, and I may want to cheat a little and slightly change the question to 'the most surprising thing I learned *from* Joe,'" he says. "The filming experiences we had in Joe's art studio in his Brooklyn apartment are the most memorable for me. Surrounded by the books, movie posters and pop culture objects

JOE COLEMAN AND WHITNEY WARD AS KING AND QUEEN OF THE 2024 CONEY ISLAND MERMAID PARADE.

COLEMAN AND WARD ON THE BEACH.

that inspire him, this small and cluttered space was the epicenter of Joe's creative process."

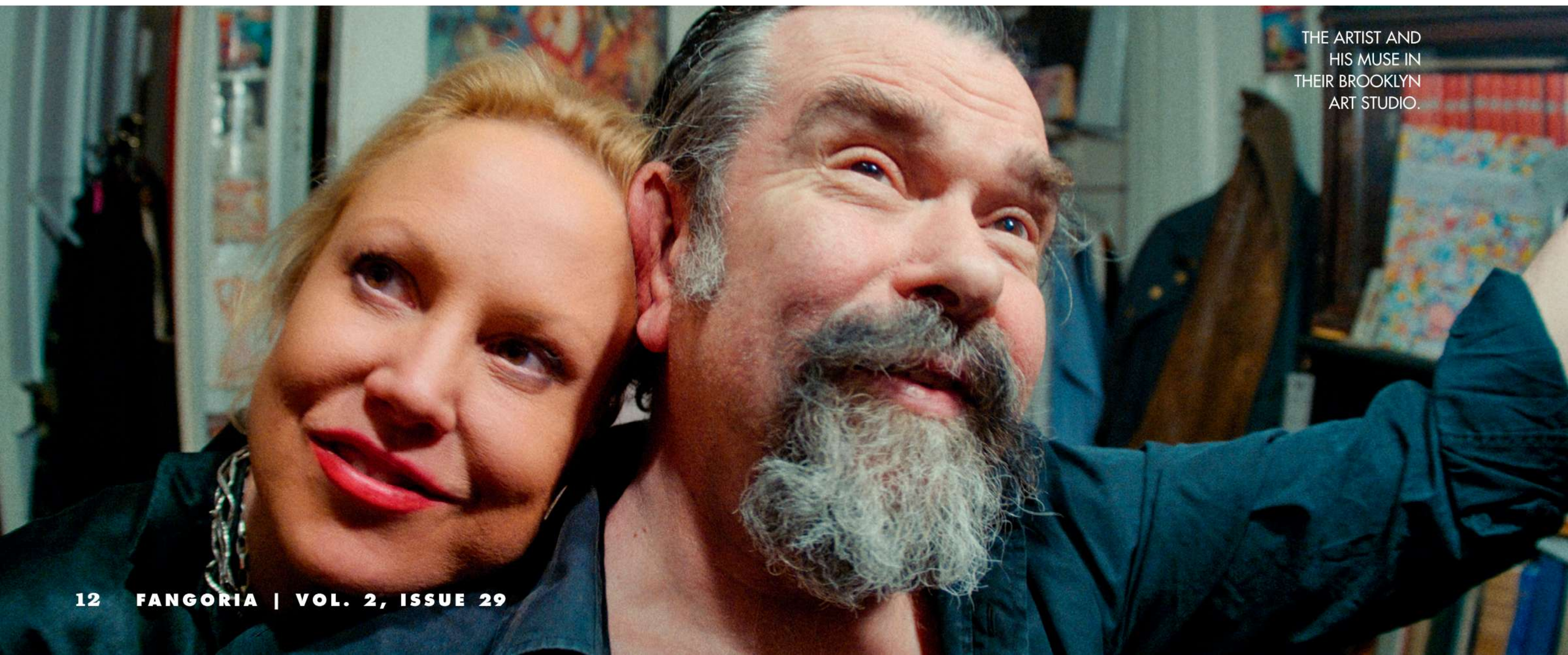
After toiling on his movie for more than a dozen years, Gracheff earned the ultimate fulfillment when *How Dark My Love* was embraced at June's Tribeca Film Festival. Further icing on the cake: winning the Audience Award for Best Documentary.

"When you work on a film for so long, you tend to create in a vacuum, and while we were hoping the film would engage audiences, you don't really know 'til that first public screening," Gracheff says. "And they loved it. Witnessing the effect our film had on the audience was super-gratifying for our entire filmmaking team. There was laughter, tears, shock, and most importantly, there was emotional connection.

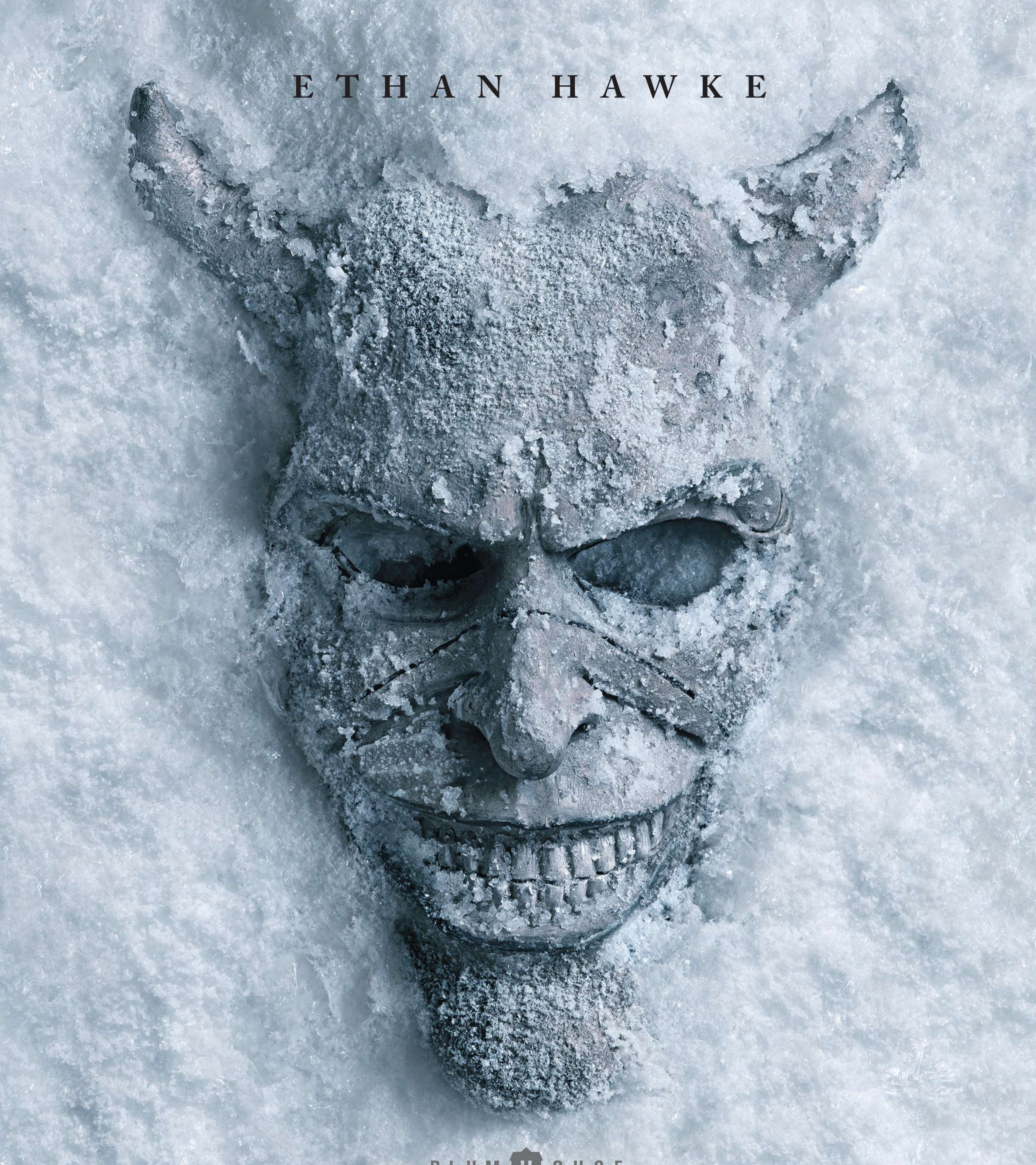
"The highlight for all of us were the people who came up afterward and shared their experience while watching," the director continues. "People feel connected to Joe and Whitney, identifying with their struggles and challenges, their hopes and their dreams. It's this human connection that we all seek out and are enriched by, and I hope our film can be part of that journey of understanding and help inspire viewers to think about, and perhaps find a new perspective on, the monumental themes of love, death and art."

Coleman was equally overwhelmed to witness how moviegoers related to his story. "I was surprised by the intensity of the emotional impact that the film had on so many people of all ages," he says. "The delicate handling by the filmmakers of the raw honesty of our shared life was a powerful gift. Proof that the trust we placed in their hands was well deserved."

How Dark My Love is currently fielding distribution offers. "We are planning our next steps now," Gracheff says, "so be sure to follow us on Instagram for the latest news and updates. In many ways, the journey of our film is just beginning, and we can't wait for more people to see it."



THE ARTIST AND HIS MUSE IN THEIR BROOKLYN ART STUDIO.



FROM BLUMHOUSE

DEAD IS JUST A WORD

BLACK PHONE 2

ONLY IN THEATERS OCTOBER 17

R STRONG VIOLENT CONTENT, GORE, TEEN DRUG USE, AND LANGUAGE

WRITTEN BY SCOTT DERRICKSON & C. ROBERT CARGILL DIRECTED BY SCOTT DERRICKSON

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Michael Gingold's
Exordium

Son of Sequel Rites

The pros and cons of taking big swings in franchise follow-ups.

It was just about a year ago that I was editorializing about the proliferation of horror sequels and the expectations attached to them. This summer, the reactions to a couple of fright follow-ups have inspired me to dive back into the subject.

The new *I Know What You Did Last Summer* just came out as I write this, titled like a remake when it's actually a sequel, albeit a sequel that plays largely like a remake. Once again, a group of young people out for a late-night drive become involved in a fatality, and one year later, a slicker-wearing, hook-wielding someone begins vengefully stalking them and killing them off. Reactions online were mixed, though there were several comments on Letterboxd and elsewhere noting the "big swings" the new *I Know...* took.

And I had to think, what big swings were those? The plot proceeds in pretty much the same manner as in the original movie, with a little more gore and some cosmetic changes but few meaningful variations. It's not really a big swing for them to have brought back *I Know...* veterans Jennifer Love Hewitt and Freddie Prinze Jr., since this kind of legacy casting has become commonplace in franchise films recently. And you certainly can't say that about the big twist/revelation at the end of the movie, since — without giving too much away — it has already been done in a number of other recent horror films, not to mention an older one that has had its own couple of much more successful legacy sequels.

The shame of it is, there's a scene in *I Know...* '25's prologue that hints at a pretty significant swing the filmmakers *could* have taken. One of the fateful group is Teddy, son of a wealthy and influential local politician, and as he drunkenly stumbles along an isolated road, he's almost creamed by a car. For a moment, it seems like he's the one who's going to get killed, and wouldn't it have been more intriguing if his friends had to cover up the death of one of their own, lest his high-powered father seek to bring them to justice? Instead, it's a stranger who dies, and not even directly at the hands (or wheels) of the youths; they're only inadvertently involved and even try to save that person from their fate, which blunts the dramatic impact of everything that follows.

Just a month earlier, the same studio (Sony/Columbia) released another genre sequel that really did take chances in the way it followed up on its forebears. Danny Boyle and Alex Garland returned from *28 Days Later* to respectively direct and script *28 Years Later*, and that one truly did take the scenario in new directions. After a first half encoring the ferocious infected attacks and compellingly bleak survival drama of their previous trendsetter, Boyle and Garland dared to significantly switch gears with the introduction of Ralph Fiennes' Dr. Ian Kelson. His appearance signals *28 Years Later*'s turn from fierce horror to an intensely emotional meditation on death and loss, as the filmmakers

successfully impart affecting weight to scenes that could have been laughable in other hands.

Clearly, not everyone agreed, though; I saw quite a few posts from fans disappointed that *28 Years Later* skimped on the "zombie" action they had come to see. Boyle and Garland, it appears, took too big a swing for some people's tastes — though their movie did wind up doing quite a bit better at the box office than the new *I Know...*

It's the eternal conundrum of sequels: how to give people who loved the originals more of the same, but different. Change can be a hard thing for some franchise followers to approve of, as witnessed with *Friday the 13th: A New Beginning*. A lot of folks who'd been faithfully following the Jason Voorhees saga did not approve of the replacement of their favorite maniac with an impostor. This despite the fact that, as others have pointed out, there's really not much difference between *New Beginning*'s Roy Burns and Jason at this point in *Friday* history; they're both big guys in hockey masks slaughtering everyone in sight, their rampages sparked by an untimely death. And since Roy is driven to mania by the death of his son, you could see him as Jason and Mrs. Voorhees rolled up in one.

I have a feeling that as time goes on, *28 Years Later* will continue to impress more viewers who can appreciate it for its stand-alone virtues, and not judge it so much on how much it echoes its predecessors. That becomes easier to do when a sequel takes its place in the overall cinematic universe, where it can be sampled and enjoyed based on its own merits rather than comparisons to what preceded it. Certainly there's precedent for that in horror history, most notably the case of *Halloween III: Season of the Witch*. Back when it first came out in 1982, many fans and genre critics (like Joe Bob Briggs; see Fango #17) came expecting more Michael Myers shenanigans — despite his rather definitive end in *Halloween II* — and their reactions to the totally different story devised by Tommy Lee Wallace and an uncredited Nigel Kneale ranged from disappointment to outrage. Today, the tide has changed, and many fans who first viewed *Halloween III* on video, unencumbered by the expectations of seeing the very

THOUGH THE NEW *I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER* FAILED TO HOOK VIEWERS, *28 YEARS LATER* (PREVIOUS PAGE) CERTAINLY GRABBED AUDIENCES.

latest in a contemporary film series, have embraced and celebrated it, in part precisely *because* it offers something fresh and distinct from the Myers movies.

Almost exactly thirty years after the Silver Shamrock saga hit screens, similar responses greeted the release of *Halloween Ends*, also the third film in its particular franchise. Though the promised emphasis was the further exploration, and the much-anticipated end, of the Laurie/Michael saga, director David Gordon Green and his writers devoted a large portion of the running time to newly minted murderer Corey Cunningham. Clearly, Green knew he was taking a risky detour away from what *Halloween* buffs were anticipating; that's clear from his use of the same font in Ends' opening credits as was used for those in *Halloween III*. And sure enough, many fans rebelled, and *Ends* wound up making about two-thirds of its box office in its first weekend. This time, however, it wasn't very long at all before a groundswell of support for the movie, and its deviation from the norm, began appearing online.

For the record, I'm in the camp that has issues with *Ends* and its switch in narrative priorities — not just because the Corey story is a distraction that prevents Laurie's from getting its proper due, but because, to my mind, it doesn't work on its own terms, being neither interestingly nor plausibly developed. So, the inevitable question: Might I change my mind about *Ends* if I give it another chance in future years? Anything's possible, but I can't make any promises; I'm pretty secure in my first impression on that one. After all, I really liked *Halloween III* even when I first saw it way back when it first came out. 💀

HALLOWEEN III HAS RIPENED WITH AGE. UNLIKE LITTLE BUDDY HERE.

PHOTO (TOP LEFT) BY MIYA MIZUNO, COURTESY OF SONY PICTURES / (TOP RIGHT) BY BROOK RUSHTON, COURTESY OF SONY PICTURES

SceneQueen

LESS IS MORE

IT'S TIME WE ALL COLLECTIVELY FOCUS ON WHAT MATTERS MOST TO US.

BY BARBARA CRAMPTON

Recently, I spoke to an executive at the distribution company that released two of my films, *Jakob's Wife* and *Suitable Flesh*. I worked really hard on both, as actor and producer, and I'm proud of them. *Jakob's Wife* came out during the pandemic, so many of my fans aren't familiar with it, but I think it's my best work. I asked the executive if he thought we could ever get a sequel to either film.

BARBARA CRAMPTON IN TWO OF HER FAVORITE FILMS TO WORK ON AS BOTH ACTOR AND PRODUCER: AS DANIELLA UPTON IN *SUITABLE FLESH* (LEFT) AND AS ANNE FEDDER IN *JAKOB'S WIFE* (RIGHT).

Without hesitation he replied, "Well, Barbara, you have to talk about them more!"

"Isn't that why you have a marketing and publicity department?" I replied, thinking to myself, "*It's not my job to promote this stuff! Humph.*"

But then he gently pressed on. "It's up to you. If you talk about it and people want it, then it'll happen."

Writing his words out here, it's actually quite obvious, and yet I had to dig inside my own psyche to make sense of what it means for my future work, and for the future of our industry.

In the old days, when a movie came out in the theater it might run for a couple months or more. A few years later, there would be a revival screening. Then it might show on TV and be back in theaters again after enough time had passed. Then it would come out on home video and get another life there.

At that time, in horror's heyday of the '70s, '80s and a bit into the '90s, there wasn't as much content as today. In fact, distributors were clamoring for more films. I recall when Jim Gianopulos worked at Paramount and was quite friendly with Full Moon's Charles Band, with whom I have frequently collaborated. Gianopulos was always looking for a new title to scoop up. Those were the boom times, baby.

Today we have prestige TV, video games and YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, Facebook and Bluesky – not to mention the everyday crisis news stories to digest. All that, and more people are making more movies now than ever before.

It feels increasingly like we are in factory mode. A movie premieres at a film fest or streaming channel. It's marketed to its audience for a few weeks… and then it's on to the next. When I work so hard on each movie I do – whether its acting, producing or both – it feels like it's over in a flash, and then there's a new movie for the distributors to focus on. Are we lucky to have so many opportunities for entertainment, or are we stuck on an endless hamster wheel of technological excess?

THE AUTHOR AT ONE OF THE MANY CONVENTIONS, PANELS, AND Q&AS SHE ATTENDS IN SUPPORT OF HER WORK.

I am part of the problem. In my own universe I focus on so many things throughout the day. I am full of information and stories that I only really half digest, and I don't have the energy to deep dive on the few things I used to be really interested in. I have six projects I want to produce, and at various times each one ends up sacrificed by my divided attention. I have a lot of friends, but not a lot of time to feel really close to them. Each moment my focus is pulled in too many directions – do you ever feel that way?

When I made *Jakob's Wife*, that was my focus and interest, but after it was over I yearned to make another film. So right away I set about finding a few projects as possibilities – but not before I checked my email and looked at Instagram and went to some screenings and watched the news and scrolled through TikTok and worked out and helped my kids and husband with their stuff and sold a house or two and moved… you get the idea!

My question to myself and to you is: Are we all doing too much, consuming too much? Are these connections we've made through content and technology forcing us to have a surface relationship with our world and ourselves? For me, the answer is yes. Maybe it is for you, too.

Back to my conversation with the executive. He told me to talk more about the movies I want to succeed, but he ended up giving me more than that to think about. I need to choose my time more wisely. I have to focus on what is most important to me. I could talk to my fans and friends and journalists about sequels to *Jakob's Wife* or *Suitable Flesh*, or the reboot of *Tourist Trap* or a *Re-Animator 2.0* I'd like to get off the ground with Brian Yuzna, or my body horror movie I may or may not direct or the crime drama I've toiled on for a while – but I can't do all of those. It's too much. I'm getting older and I need to be more selective with my time and energy, and if I want any one project to thrive, I need to talk about it, focus on it, go deep on it.

We are all spread too thin, and when you feel the energy siphoning off you from that state of being, nothing truly significant gets done. I don't want to realize in a few years that I spun my wheels and then – *gulp* – have nothing substantial to show for it. So I'm here to say that we need to make a pact. We need to focus on quality over quantity, on less is more, on fewer projects about which we can feel genuinely passionate, and especially on deeper friendships and deeper meaning. Who's with me? 💀

PHOTOS (LEFT) COURTESY OF SHUDDER/RLJE / (TOP RIGHT) BY CHRISTOPHER DE LA ROSA / STOCK PHOTO BY MICHAL BEDNAREK

Stephen Graham Jones'

SLASHER NATION

THE NIGHT *SHE* CAME HOME

A LITTLE EARLIER ON HALLOWEEN NIGHT, 1963.

It's not that she hates the little twerp. It's not his fault he's ruining everything. He just wants to dress up and go trick or treating, get home with his candy before their parents get back from their fancy dinner, so he can stash it all over his room, only leaving the butterscotches and peppermints in his bag for their mom to ceremonially throw away, "Unless one of you wants to pay for the dentist?"

It's an argument she couldn't win when she was his age, and she sort of feels sorry for him.

The twerp.

She wants some candy of her own tonight, though. You never outgrow candy. Just, what you consider "candy" might become something... else. Something better. Something the dentist doesn't have anything to do with.

She's just seventeen, yes, she tells herself. Just like the song on her Philco says.

Maybe that song will even come on when her, you know, boyfriend's back.

Just, he has to be gone by the time her parents get home. Meaning, she doesn't have time to help any little twerps get sugared up and rot their teeth out.

Never mind if he is pretty cute in that costume.

"Walk or you'll ruin the knees," she tells him, dragging him by his left wrist through the park across the street.

Somehow not getting any lighter, he finds the grass with his feet.

"Just let me go by myself!" he pleads. "I won't tell, promise!"

"You won't, no," she says, looking for the right tree. "But what about when one of Mom's friends tells her how 'scary' you were when you knocked on their door?"

He somehow gets heavier.

Someday he'll understand what it's like to be so much in love.

Not for a few years, though. Not while candy's still so close to his heart. Well, candy and wearing masks.

You can't kiss anyone while wearing a mask, though.

He'll leave them behind soon enough. Someday he'll be the boyfriend standing out some girl's window, won't he?

By then, this night won't even be a dim memory.

Good, she tells herself. Because this is probably the kind of thing that could warp him, if he was going to remember it.

She can't lock him in a closet, though – where he can scream and mess everything up? – and he's too young to watch that alien movie they're playing tonight, with the marshal from *Gunsmoke*.

What she can do, though… it was Marshal Dillon's idea: "Tie him to a tree, I'll be fast, promise."

Because little twerps have devious little fingers that can undo knots, she's had to add on to that idea, get a little devious herself.

But someday he'll understand.

"There," she tells him, chucking her chin ahead to the big tree right in the middle of the park. The one in the deepest dark, where it doesn't matter if he screams his little head off or not.

He fights harder, panics, but big sisters can hold on tighter than little brothers can pull away.

"Just until we're done," she tells him, dropping the wooden milk crate she has under her other arm.

The thick rope in there bounces out a bit.

When he sees it, he starts backpedaling, his breath faster, deeper, more scared. "No, no, no!" he says, almost crying, "I'll stay in my room this time, I'll –"

But she's already slipping the noose over his neck. It snags a bit on his mask, but she guides it around, never mind his struggles.

"Don't pee your costume!" she warns him. "Do little boys with wet pants get candy, or don't they?"

Slowly, he stops struggling, is sort of dying inside, she can tell. Even through his mask, she can see his eyes film over with defeat.

She peels his mask off, and works one of the neck ruffles of his costume out from under the rope. She doesn't want to hurt him, after all. Just keep him away from the house for a few minutes.

"Now if you be still, you'll be okay," she tells him, standing the milk crate on its end and looping the free end of the rope up over a low limb.

He's shaking his head no, begging her not to, his little fingers to the rope at his throat. Even little twerps have seen enough cowboy television to know what a hanging is.

This isn't going to be that, though. Not if he'll… just… be still.

And balance.

Just in case he doesn't, though, instead of tying the dangling end of the rope to anything solid, she just catches it under the milk crate he's standing on. That way, if he loses his balance, steps off, letting the rope take his little twerp weight, the crate will fall away, the rope, released, will suck up and around that limb, and he'll fall – no harm done. Just another prank, on the night where there's supposed to be pranks.

Not that he knows that.

"Okay, just stand here, and don't step off, or you know what happens," she tells him, kneeling to be down at his level, look in his dead little eyes.

His glare back at her is so disconnected, though, that she starts back, has to catch herself on a hand.

It's like he's already died.

Good, she tells herself.

The little twerp.

He doesn't know that there's no real threat here. He also doesn't know that what she's about to hustle back to the house for, who, he's so fine, just like her Philco won't stop singing.

And, she adds to herself, standing, brushing her knees clean, it's not like she agreed to babysit tonight, right?

"He'll just be a minute," she leans down to whisper into the little twerp's ear, the scratchy fibers from the rope tickling her jaw. "Not even that, probably!"

The little twerp doesn't say anything, is just holding that rope he thinks is so deadly with his fingers.

She's halfway back across the park before realizing she's still got his mask in her hand.

Oh well, she tells herself.

He can get it whenever he makes his way back to the house.

If there's time and if he doesn't tell on her, maybe she'll even take him out for some candy.

It's the night for it, after all. 💀

Can I be Jason, dead at the end of the installment, but we all know that eye's about to open behind the mask? "Bye for now," I'm saying. But my slasher-noodling is far from over. I'll be back in here doing this from time to time, probably under the same banner. I seem to be trying to figure things out with lies for the moment, not analysis or criticism or whatever a column is. Surprised I went as long as I did without shading into fiction, really; it's my natural home, my happy place. There are candles guttering all around, and shadows moving out the corner of your eye, and all the doors creak open so slowly, the better to draw you into that darkness. We'd have it no other way, would we? Just, let's hope that blood on the wall isn't yours. Well, that it isn't *all* yours. Go down swinging, I mean. It's what we've learned from Nancy and Laurie, Alice and Sidney. It's what this one girl named Jade taught me.

Stay ~~golden~~ *alive*,
Stephen Graham Jones

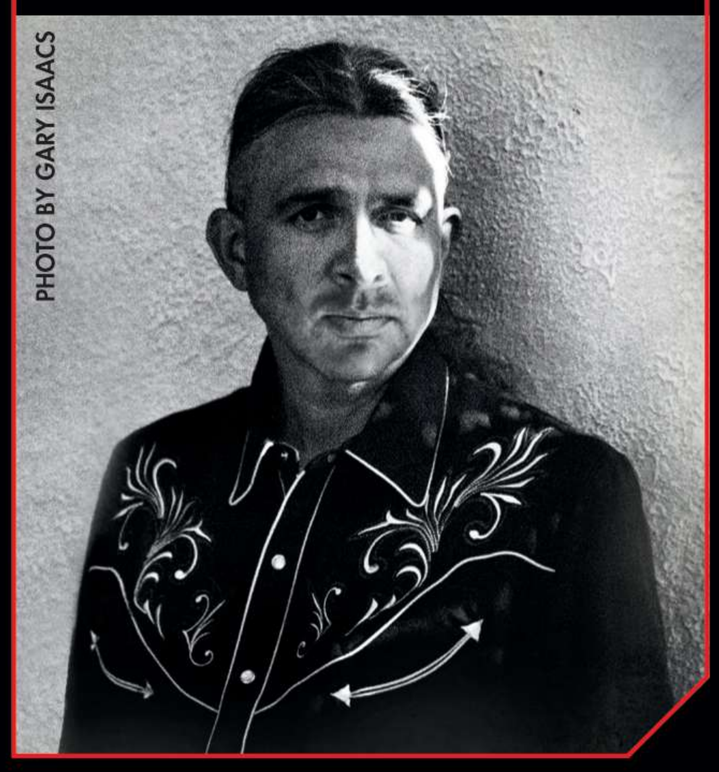

PHOTO BY GARY ISAACS

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *THE HAUNTING OF TOWNE POINT MALL*

YOUR PLACE IS HERE NOW

IT SOUNDS LIKE AN INVITATION. IT'S ACTUALLY A COMMAND.

A DINNER WITH A NEW "MOTHER" WHO WASN'T INVITED. A HALLOWEEN VISITOR OFFERS A TREAT YOU MUST NOT REFUSE. A PUZZLE BOOK THAT PREDICTS YOUR FUTURE—AND TAKES ITS CUT. A CARDBOARD CUTOUT BOY THAT WON'T STAY WHERE IT'S PUT. A DARK CARNIVAL RIDE WITH NO POWER RUNS PERFECTLY ON WHAT YOU FEAR MOST.

THESE AND OTHER TALES CONVERGE ON ONE MESSAGE:
YOUR PLACE IS HERE NOW. TAKE YOUR SEAT

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON AND BOOKSTORES ONLINE

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VELOX BOOKS

Ben Leonberg on

GOOD BOY

By Michael Gingold

One of the best performances in a genre movie this year is given by a lead who didn't even know he was acting. Filmmaker Ben Leonberg cast his own brown-and-white retriever Indy as the lead in *Good Boy*, playing a dog (also named Indy) who is brought by his owner Todd to a secluded house in the woods. Todd (played physically by Leonberg and voiced by Shane Jensen) has been diagnosed with cancer, and the house is "sick" too – infested with a supernatural presence that only Indy can sense, and from which he must protect his owner.

Good Boy, set to debut on Shudder and AMC+ in late October 2025 following extremely well-received theatrical play and select theatrical bookings, isn't simply a gimmick movie with a canine spin on the haunted-house genre. It's a deeply-felt meditation on the relationship between people and their pets that keeps the creep factor high throughout. FANGORIA spoke with Leonberg, who scripted the film with Alex Cannon, following *Good Boy*'s screening at Montreal's Fantasia International Film Festival.

WHO DO YOU THINK WAS EASIER FOR BEN LEONBERG TO DIRECT: OL' INDY THE DOG, OR OLD INDIE DAWG LARRY FESSENDEN (FACING PAGE)?

Good Boy offers much more than some people might expect from a "dog sees ghosts" story. What were the genesis and inspirations behind the storyline?

I had probably just watched *Poltergeist* for the millionth time, and that movie begins with a golden retriever wandering around the house, clearly clued-in that something's going on before any of the humans. I started thinking that somebody should make a movie entirely from that point of view, where the dog is the main character, and from there it was off to the races.

Did you always intend for your own dog to star?

No, not at all. I wrote the film expecting that I'd use another dog – an actor dog. I think I'd been working on the idea for several years before Indy entered my life. The reason I did start working with him was that I wanted to make these proof-of-concept shorts to figure out how I could tell the story cinematically. Because I wanted to have a realistic canine protagonist, where he's not like Air Bud or Lassie and can do things a normal dog can't, besides the caveat that he can perhaps see the supernatural.

So I was making these shorts, experimenting with how to do shot/reverse shot – regular stuff that would be very straightforward with a human actor. Since I had my own dog, I started filming that stuff in the backyard or the basement. One of those shorts got a bunch of traction online, won a bunch of awards – Indy was nominated for an acting award. And since people responded so strongly to Indy, and I learned how to work with him in this unique way, he became the obvious choice.

What inspired you to tell a story where the lead human character is ailing?

I really have to credit my co-writer, Alex. We knew we wanted to make what appeared to be a familiar haunted house film, but for there to be something more to the idea. The drama would certainly be about the relationship between a man and his pet, but the more we thought about it, we realized mortality is a constant theme of ghost stories. We started thinking about the experience of death from an animal's perspective. In childhood, a lot of us learn about life and death through the loss of a pet, so what would the experience of potentially losing a loved one be like from a dog's point of view?

We also started talking about the idea that, from a dog's perspective, there's quite a lot about modern-day life that would seem supernatural. Like, I had a Roomba, and I thought that, to my dog, it must seem like there's a ghost that comes out at 9:30 every day after I've left for work and moves this thing around. Similarly, we don't really know what it's like for a dog that's been trained to detect

LEONBERG DIRECTS INDY IN ONE OF THE BEST PERFORMANCES (OF ANY SPECIES) OF THE YEAR.

cancer or epilepsy, which is something that's happening now with trained medical dogs. It might feel quite a bit supernatural for them to sense something that we cannot. So we used that idea of sickness, and potentially encroaching death, to think about how that might feel, to a dog, like a haunting.

How much was Indy directed, and how much of the movie is just you capturing his instinctive reactions to things?

We like to say that Indy hadn't been trained to do much more than be our friend. My wife Kari Fischer, who was my co-producer, and I trained Indy in what I would call advanced obedience. He's good at staying in one spot, and we're pretty good at directing his movement, but that only got us so far. Some of the best scenes are things that Indy genuinely does in his everyday life. One of my favorite shots is when Todd gets out of bed, and Indy weaves between his legs as a way to kind of start the day; it's a cute little moment between owner and dog. Indy actually does that with me every morning, so to film it, I just set up the camera the night before, was able to get out of bed, turn it on, and be set up to capture this thing that Indy does naturally.

Our days were very short, because Indy's work days were just a few hours. So we filmed for over 400 four-hour days over the course of three years. The production functioned almost like a documentary being made over a really long duration.

Also, from the beginning, we always intended to shoot it from the dog's eyeline. *E.T.* was a touchstone for us; that film is shot from kid height, where sometimes you see the adults cropped unnaturally because we're down at Drew Barrymore's level. Similarly, in *Good Boy*, we're just nineteen inches off the ground for almost the entire film, which means that the human actors are mostly seen from the chest down. What was great about that was it allowed me and Kari to stand in for the human characters throughout, and then Shane Jensen and Arielle Friedman provided the vocal performances.

How did you do the scenes where Indy is under stress or in danger without actually harming or scaring him?

The entire filming schedule and production was built around him, so sequences like those were designed and thought out ahead of time, to maximize his comfort. Many of them employed elements of shooting in reverse. So in the scenes where it looks like Indy is being pulled by a chain that's tightening and dragging him toward this ominous, dark space, what's actually happening is that in that dark space is a tennis ball or a bowl of food that he really wants to go to, and, just off-camera, my wife is holding his back legs and telling him to wait. And played in reverse, it looks like, rather than him trying to run forward, he's trying to pull back and fight against this thing. So there were a lot of old-school, very practical filmmaking techniques that were all in service of getting a great performance from Indy. 💀

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

STANDING IN FOR HIS LEAD ALLOWED LEONBERG TO GET THE PERFORMANCE HE KNEW INDY WAS CAPABLE OF.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHUDDER AND CHRIS WILLARDCOMMUNICATIONS

FINNEY (MASON THAMES) HAS A WINTRY REUNION WITH THE GRABBER (ETHAN HAWKE).

THE BLACK PHONE RINGS AGAIN:

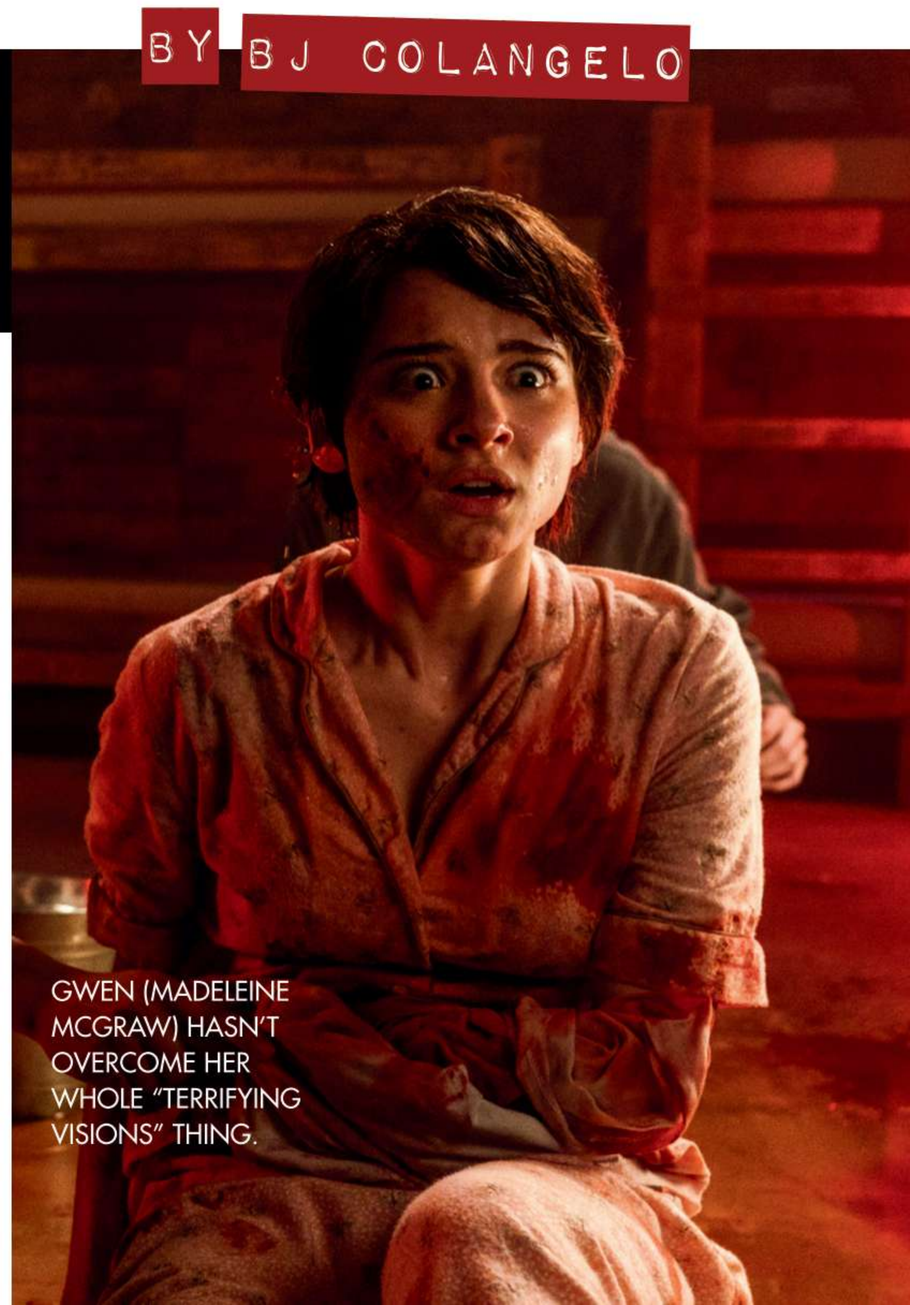
Derrickson, Hawke, and McGraw Answer the Call

BY BJ COLANGELO

"It's scary to do a sequel to a movie that everybody loves," confesses Ethan Hawke. "You don't want to do a magic trick twice." Fortunately, for the man who first brought The Grabber to life, horror fans are waiting for an encore.

Effectively capturing 1970s suburban decay, Scott Derrickson's adaptation of Joe Hill's short story, *The Black Phone*, trapped audiences in a grimy, claustrophobic reality where violence is disturbingly mundane and the ghosts of children brutally murdered do not haunt, they guide. The horror of *The Black Phone* feels real, born of the helplessness of youth and the acknowledgment that there are people in our society who revel in the kind of monstrous atrocities typically reserved for midnight movies. Co-written with longtime collaborator C. Robert Cargill, Derrickson never intended for there to be a sequel.

"There's a delicate balance that you have to strike if you're going to make a successful horror sequel," Derrickson says. "One side of that balance is to make something too close to the original – audiences don't want to just see the same movie – on the opposite side is you can't make it too different, because if you veer too far off the path of what was good about the original and what people liked about the original, then they're not going to want that either."

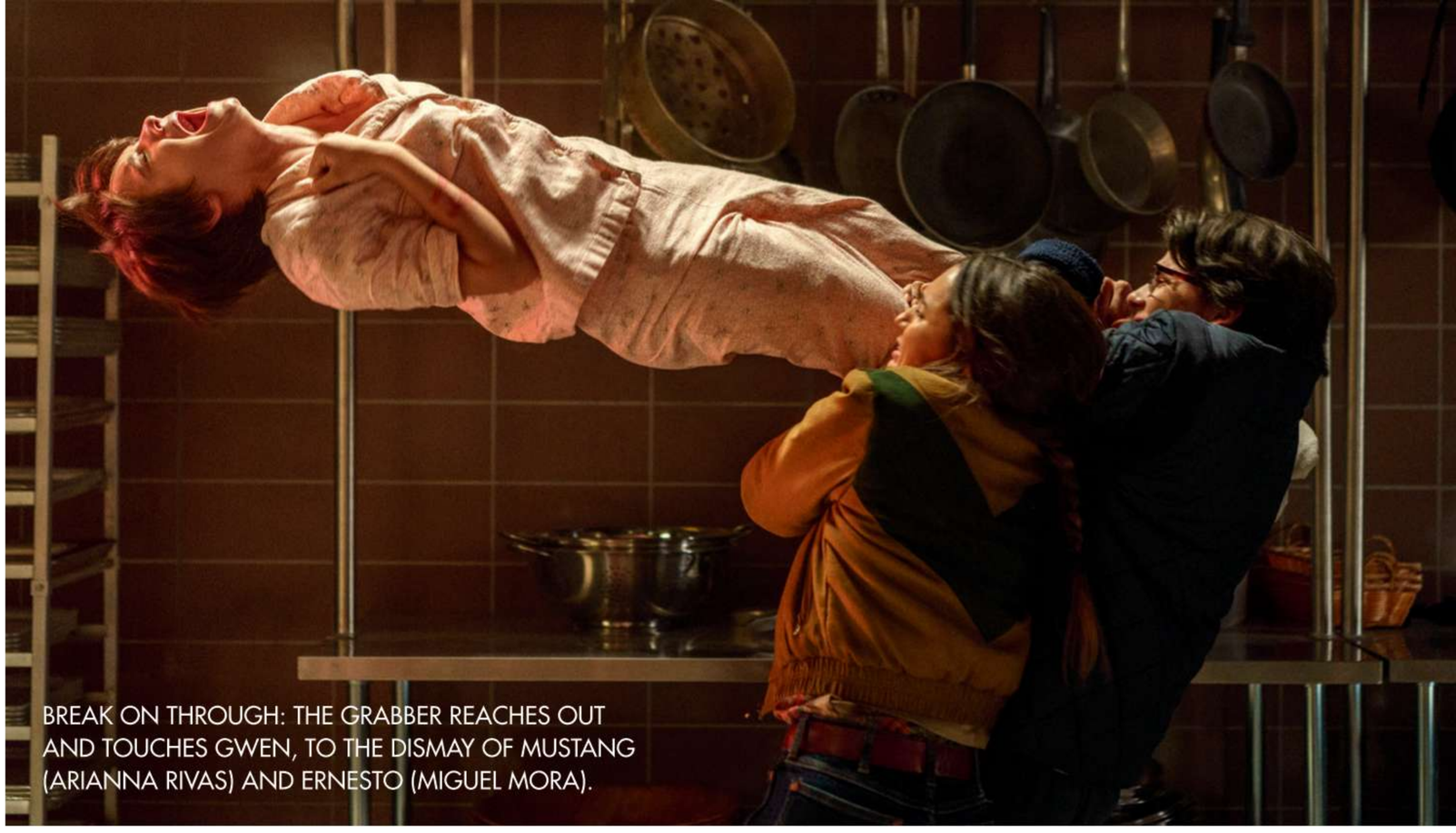


GWEN (MADELEINE MCGRAW) HASN'T OVERCOME HER WHOLE "TERRIFYING VISIONS" THING.

If you ask Ethan Hawke, the power of *The Black Phone* was in its absolute simplicity. "I mean, what's scarier than somebody who wants to hurt children? What's more lovable than a brother and sister taking care of each other?" he muses. "You have this theme of all these parents and society failing young people, and [the kids] having to take responsibility for themselves. It's very, very simple, but it's true. It's an actual story."

Hawke also praises Derrickson and Cargill for the personal touches in their scripts, and for Derrickson's ability to use genre to communicate a bigger message beyond the scares. "In the rules of a certain genre, you can discuss subjects that normally might be pretentious, but if you frame it as a horror movie, it's genuinely scary," says Hawke. "Working for them is fun because they always have some underground theme that they're actually really interested in imbuing into the math of the horror genre."

As Derrickson rightfully points out, *The Black Phone* is a middle-school coming-of-age story, with siblings Finney (Mason Thames) and Gwen Blake (Madeleine McGraw) at the center. "I thought if I waited a couple of years and made a movie before a sequel for *[The] Black Phone* (which ended up being *The Gorge*), then I could make a high school coming-of-age movie with the same characters," Derrickson explains. "And that became immediately interesting to me, staying with these kids that we grew attached to in a high school environment and not just because high school movies are so different, but specifically because high school horror movies are *very* different. There's an expectation with that genre for higher octane horror and more violence."



BREAK ON THROUGH: THE GRABBER REACHES OUT AND TOUCHES GWEN, TO THE DISMAY OF MUSTANG (ARIANNA RIVAS) AND ERNESTO (MIGUEL MORA).

When Finn finally escaped the basement at the end of *The Black Phone*, he left his sadistic kidnapper with a snapped neck and a telephone cord wrapped around his throat. As quick as people were to question why make a sequel in the first place, Hawke correctly notes that the first film already established the possibility for The Grabber's return to threaten the children who ended his streak of kidnapping, torturing, and killing children. "We've known those boys were dead, so we know that there is a place where, in this universe, in this cinematic landscape, being dead doesn't mean the story's over," Hawke says. As The Grabber rightfully declares in *Black Phone 2*, "dead" is just a word.

For star Madeleine McGraw, there was "no hesitation" to return to this world as Gwen, but she was very curious how Derrickson and Cargill were going to continue the story of the Blake siblings and The Grabber: "You can really do anything, which is one of the things that I love about horror," McGraw says, "But as soon as I read the script, I was like, 'Oh my God, I'm so excited, I cannot wait to be a part of this, when do we start?'"

In the same sense that the backdrop of *The Black Phone* was inspired by Derrickson's own

PHOTOS BY SABRINA LANTOS, COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL PICTURES

BLACK PHONE 2 HAS MORE THAN ONE DECEASED RETURNING CHARACTER: HERE, GWEN MEETS THE AXED MAX (JAMES RANSONE) FROM THE FIRST FILM.

experiences with violence as a child, *Black Phone 2* pulls from his time spent at winter camps in the Colorado mountains. Summer camps are usually the iconic settings for horror films, but by focusing on a winter camp, Derrickson can play with tradition without doing something overdone. "It's one thing to go up into the mountains to go skiing, but it's another thing to be in these log cabins and in these campgrounds with the weather that can be that volatile and that harsh and cold," Derrickson explains. "It seemed like a good place to bring these characters at that age and put them through another gauntlet."

Snowy settings are severely under-utilized in the genre, but Derrickson wanted to use the elements to his advantage. "Kurosawa is my favorite director, and he made weather a character in almost every film he made," he says. "I think it's cinematic and I think audiences like to be transported into extremes of weather that they don't normally live their lives in." The addition of weather adds an extra oppressive force for Finn and Gwen to be up against – a threat just as dangerous as an undead serial killer.

It's been three years since we've seen the Blake siblings, which might as well be another lifetime when you're transitioning from the tween to teen years. You couldn't pay most people to mine their childhoods or teen years for writing inspiration, but Derrickson has now done it twice: "I have no interest in looking back on my childhood or even my high school years in a nostalgic way," says Derrickson. "I'm interested in the things that you feel when you're a teenager, because they're some of the most powerful things that you feel in your life... because it's the same for all of us, and that's the draw for me."

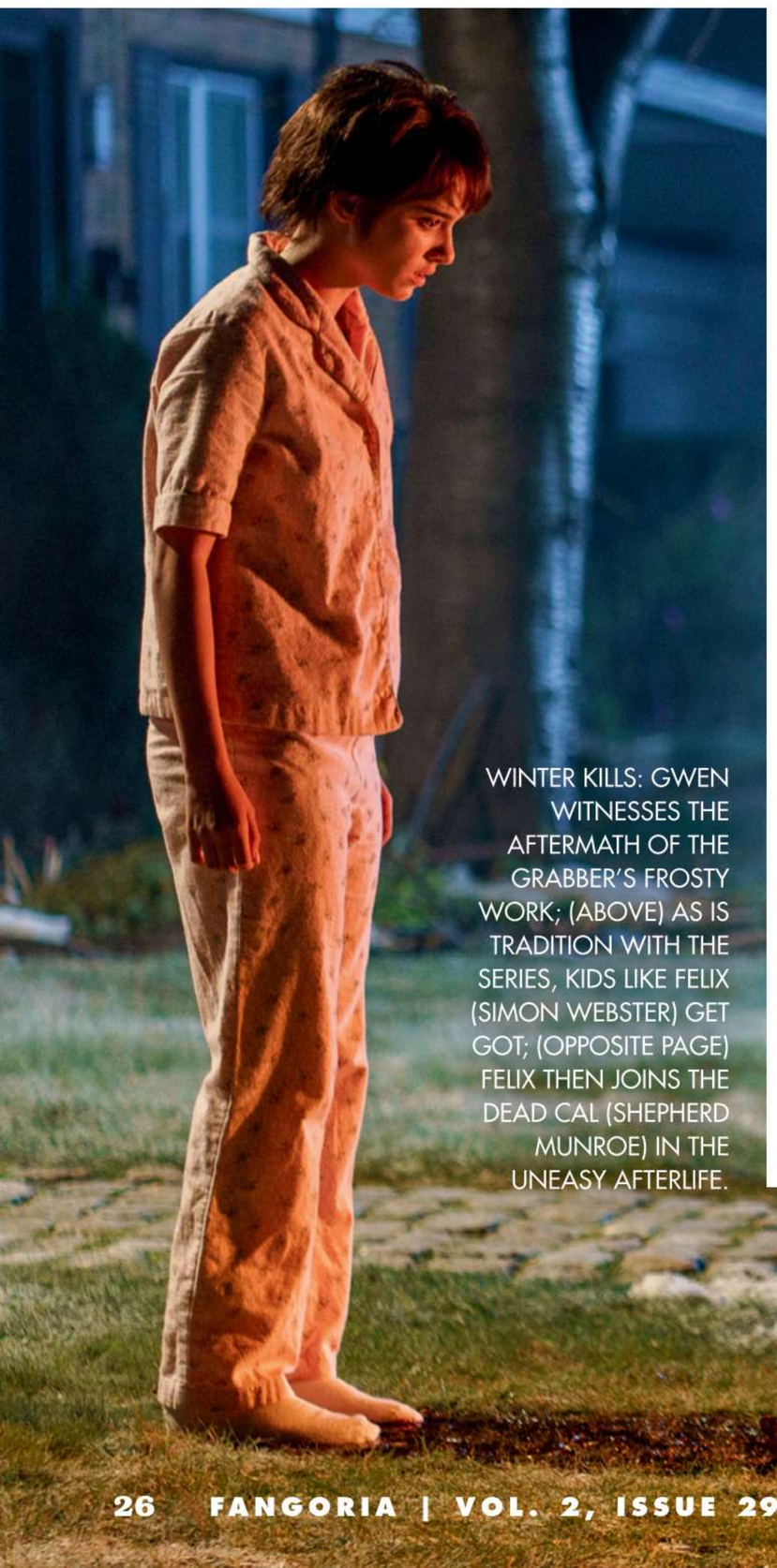
> **"Childhood is scary for everybody, not just people with really traumatic childhoods like I had, and I think it taps into something really human."**
>
> - Scott Derrickson -

But while the average teenager is dealing with extreme emotions like love and heartbreak, Finn and Gwen have endured the unspeakable. Their father drunkenly abused them for years, their mother died by suicide after being plagued with disturbing visions – an ability Gwen has inherited – and Finn was kidnapped by the serial child killer who murdered five boys in his community, including his best friend Robin, who doubled as his shield from bullies. It's not exactly the typical high school experience.

"Because it was so traumatic in the first movie and with everything that Finney went through, Gwen now kind of feels like a lot of it is her fault," McGraw tells us of her ever-protective character. "She's trying to figure out a way to help her brother move past all of this, but at the same time, she also feels like she's kind of helpless, and she can't really do anything to help him besides be there for him." To make matters worse, the visions Gwen has that helped her locate the bodies of the missing boys in the first film haven't exactly helped her relate to her classmates. She and her brother's relationship is still the bleeding heart of the sequel, but Derrickson says that centralizing the focus on Gwen this time around was the natural next step, a way to capture that "different, but similar" approach found in the majority of successful sequels. *Black Phone 2* is still "very much a two-hander," but in the way the first film was focused on Finn's experiences with Gwen still very present, *Black Phone 2* is exploring the inverse.

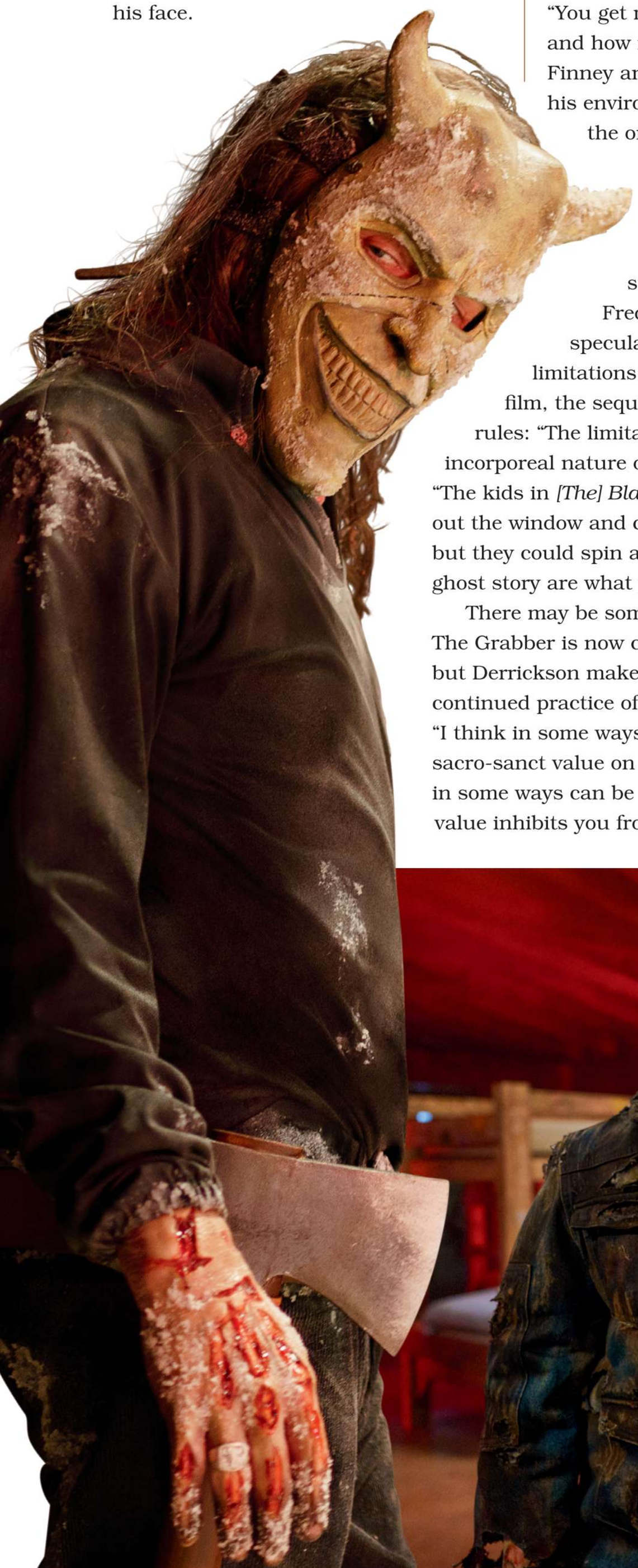
McGraw's portrayal of Gwen was one of the most heavily praised aspects of the first film, and she knew heading into the sequel that the stakes were higher: "I have never felt more pressure [than] playing a role like Gwen," she confesses. McGraw admits she frequently called Derrickson to vent about how scared she was to embody Gwen as a high-schooler, but the thrill of a horror sequel with more action, more scares, and opportunities to throw herself – sometimes literally – back into the world of *The Black Phone* was too great a lure.

And Ethan Hawke was ready and willing to don The Grabber's mask once again: "The second you put that mask on, you are evil incarnate. It takes over," he says. "It's unlocking an unknown force that should not be unlocked." The Grabber's mask is like



WINTER KILLS: GWEN WITNESSES THE AFTERMATH OF THE GRABBER'S FROSTY WORK; (ABOVE) AS IS TRADITION WITH THE SERIES, KIDS LIKE FELIX (SIMON WEBSTER) GET GOT; (OPPOSITE PAGE) FELIX THEN JOINS THE DEAD CAL (SHEPHERD MUNROE) IN THE UNEASY AFTERLIFE.

a grotesque riddle – sometimes smiling, sometimes scowling – a trickster's cold sneer carved from nightmares. "What's so interesting to me about masks is that it unlocks body language… and what a powerful thing it is," he explains. Hawke says he doesn't have a favorite version of the mask, but he loves what they each communicate and the questions they pose to the audience about why he insists on covering his face.



The Grabber died unmasked, but now that he's joined the land of the undead, the mask must return as his true face. Will we ever learn the truth behind the creation of the mask, or why The Grabber chooses to wear it? Definitely not. "It's a private secret that's very important to him that cannot be shared," Hawke says. But he does promise that *Black Phone 2* will explore more of his character's past. "You get more about what's driving him and how it all started," he teases. "And Finney and his sister are trapped in his environment – to the scene of the original sin, as it were."

Although he's now in the land of the dead, The Grabber hasn't magically become an all-powerful supernatural demon like Freddy Krueger as many have speculated. Just as there were limitations for the ghosts of the first film, the sequel is sticking by those same rules: "The limitation comes from the inherent incorporeal nature of being a ghost," he explains. "The kids in *[The] Black Phone* couldn't just break out the window and carry Finn out the window, but they could spin a 7-Up bottle. The rules of a ghost story are what you see."

There may be some limitations to what The Grabber is now capable of as a ghost, but Derrickson makes no apologies for his continued practice of terrorizing young people. "I think in some ways, we place an almost sacro-sanct value on protecting children, which in some ways can be proble-matic when that value inhibits you from telling proper stories about them," he says. "Childhood is scary for everybody, not just people with really traumatic childhoods like I had, and I think it taps into something really human." It's that human element that keeps drawing so many of us back to the genre, an outlet to safely explore how unfathomably hard life can be sometimes. "The ratcheted-up violence that you get typically with a high school horror film, going all the way back to the original *Halloween*, stems from the accentuated emotional violence of being a teenager," Derrickson says. "The terror of being a teenager now is higher than it's ever been, but it's always been high."

That connective experience is why *The Black Phone* resonated – as *Black Phone 2* soon will – with so many people despite its 1970s setting, and why a young character like Gwen became an aspirational figure across multiple generations: "I feel like people can learn a lot from Gwen as a character," McGraw says. "She's just a huge fighter, and I feel like what it takes to get through your own personal hell is just to continue fighting and to never ever give up, and don't let the other people win."

Black Phone 2 is building on the chilling legacy of its predecessor, but what calls from the other side this time may not hang up. Prepare for something darker, smarter, and far more personal. The phone is ringing again… and you won't want to miss who's on the line. 💀

BLACK PHONE 2

JOE HILL AND C. ROBERT CARGILL PLAY A GAME OF TELEPHONE

BY VANNAH TAYLOR

THE GRABBER IS BACK, AND THIS TIME WE'RE READY FOR HIM.

BACK ON THE LINE: CO- SCREENWRITER C. ROBERT CARGILL AND ORIGINAL SHORT STORY AUTHOR JOE HILL ARE EXCITED TO ONCE MORE PICK UP THE *PHONE*.

PHOTO BY JESSICA CARGILL

Horror fans often bemoan the constant flood of adaptations, remakes, sequels, and "requels" that keep franchises alive – but when one is done right, we notice. Originally published in 2004 in *The 3rd Alternative*, a dark fantasy and horror magazine now known as *Black Static*, Joe Hill's "The Black Phone" has evolved into a much bigger narrative beyond its conception twenty years ago. Inspired by the evolution from short story to script to the big screen, and now a sequel, we knew that we just had to sit down with Hill and screenwriter C. Robert Cargill to break down the original story's inspirations, the adaptation process, and where we will meet Finney, Gwen, and The Grabber in *Black Phone 2*.

"A 13-year-old boy gets kidnapped, thrown into a basement, and on the first night stuck in that basement, the phone rings." That's how C. Robert Cargill would sum up the hook in Joe Hill's original short story. "It was such a great, pure, amazing work of genius short story writing, so the easiest part of adapting it was just taking Joe's story and putting it on the page."

Although it was difficult to go back to the exact moment of inspiration for a story written two decades ago, Hill explains that, rather than being a part-time magician, as he is in the film, "The Grabber is a part-time clown, and I was thinking about the crimes of John Wayne Gacy and that sort of predator. There was also a horrific murder outside Boston of a little kid who was in Little League. It was just such an awful thing, and it made me sick to my heart. His story stuck with me for a long time, and I didn't think that was how his story ought to end." By writing the character of Finney (played in the film by Mason Thames) and everything he endures, "the victim gets to have the last word. Fiction is one place we go to try to make the world right."

Faced with this inspiration, Hill, Cargill and co-writer/director Scott Derrickson tackled an array of dark subject matter, from child death to bullying and alcoholism. Hill filled us in on the spaces they went when expanding the story. "It's very autobiographical. Scott, and all three of us, really, remember that world: Dad taking the belt to you. It didn't happen in my family, but everyone knew someone. If you crossed the line, there was a physical price to pay from Dad. That and the drinking – Dad would be driving with a beer between his legs. It was just the 1970s!"

Cargill chimed in to say, "We were just exorcizing some demons from

FINNEY (MASON THAMES) IS ANSWERING RANDOM BLACK PHONES; GWEN (MADELEINE MCGRAW, BELOW) IS LOOKING UNDER BEDS. NO ONE LEARNS ANYTHING IN HORROR!

our childhood… a lot of times it's catharsis." Given the conciseness of Hill's story, scenes directly out of Derrickson and Cargill's childhoods helped them build that brutal first act illustrating the hardships of Finney's life, with some memories even cutting too deep to make the final draft. "It feels like it would be hard to write, but it really helps you fall in love with your character – and then the audience falls in love, too," Cargill notes.

Despite these rich additions to the story, Cargill and Derrickson remained extremely faithful to Hill's source material. The devil isn't in the details, but in staying true to the "essence of what that story is," says Cargill. "Sometimes you can be radical in an adaptation, but you have to get the soul right. But our writing became additive, rather than revisionary. It wasn't about changing anything in the story, because the story was what we wanted. Joe wrote a lean, mean story so we wrote out the novella version."

"Sometimes you can be radical in an adaptation, but you have to get the soul right."

- C. Robert Cargill

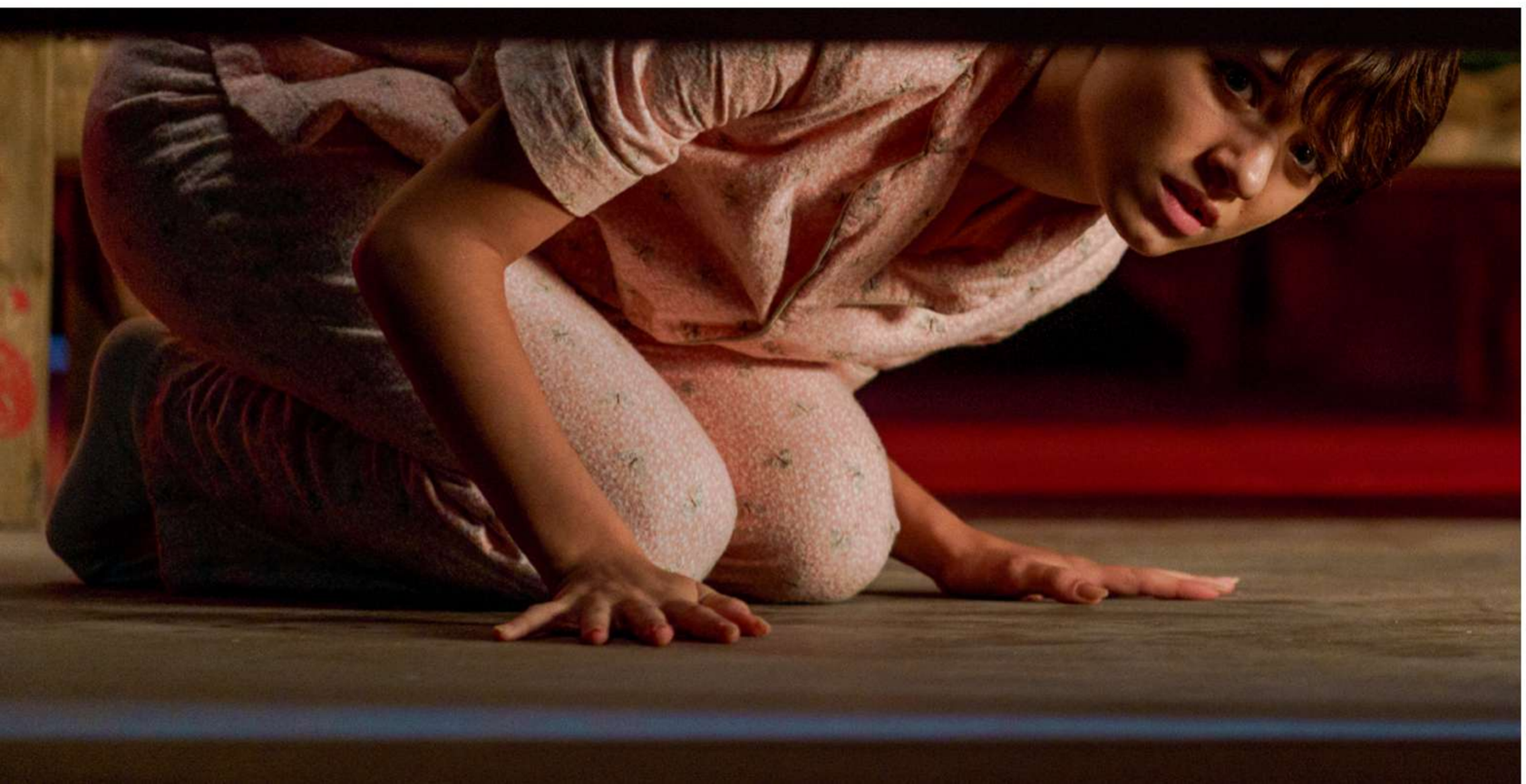
This brings us to how and why, when Finney clearly kills The Grabber (Ethan Hawke) and gets his happy ending in the first film, the story is able to continue. "Does anyone really walk away from that, into a real happy ending?" Hill pondered at the end of the first film. "The first film isn't Finney's story, it's just a chapter." Citing his previous experiences in the realm of sequels, namely *Sinister 2*, Cargill was initially hesitant, if not completely against the idea of writing a second film – so it was Joe that called him up. Cargill laughs, "He called me and said, 'I've got a really dumb idea: the phone rings, and it's The Grabber calling from Hell.'"

Of course, we all know that the return of a masked horror icon, as The Grabber has now become, isn't enough to craft a great sequel. Cargill emphasized the unique sibling relationship at the heart of *The Black Phone*, given that we rarely see specifically brother-sister relationships where those siblings share a genuine love for each other. "What if I wrote the dream sister, the sister I wanted looking for me when I was lost? So, I created Gwen," played by Madeleine McGraw. But how will that relationship evolve as these characters continue to grow? To answer those questions, Cargill explains that he and Derrickson were excited by the idea of writing a high school horror film: "We now get to play with teenage problems. Maybe Gwen has a love interest? How is Finney wrestling with all the things that happened to him in the last movie? As teenagers, we're programmed to bump up against one another and reject our family, and that's what they get to struggle with here."

The Grabber's return as another ghost communicating with Finney emboldens a key element from the first film, something that only occupied maybe a single page in the original story: the power of dreams. In Hill's story, Finney simply dreams that his older sister Susannah is biking around town looking for him, but dreams hold a real weight. "It's one of the big cheats in horror," says Cargill. "Dreams are a fun thing to play with, but they never hold any real emotional or narrative weight. Sometimes, the entire first act is a dream, and somebody wakes up and the whole audience feels cheated." Within Cargill and Derrickson's script, dreams push the plot forward, not to mention the ways they allow the filmmakers to play with visuals and structure. After expanding the mythos with the "Dreamkill" segment of *V/H/S/85*, Cargill and Derrickson take it even further in *Black Phone 2*. Cargill even hints that "*Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* was absolutely an inspiration for this new movie."

With this sequel, the filmmakers are pushing the limits of the universe, testing the resilience of their characters, and having a gory, fun time with their R rating. Joe Hill is over the moon for this opportunity, all stemming from a short story he got paid maybe $35 to write – so much so he even jokes that he is a key member of "the Derrickson-Cargill Appreciation Society." 💀

PHOTOS BY SABRINA LANTOS, COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL PICTURES



SURVIVAL IS THE MISSION

BEAST OF WAR

FROM DIRECTOR KIAH ROACHE-TURNER

IN SELECT THEATERS AND ON DIGITAL

OCTOBER 10

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RESTRICTED

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BLOODY VIOLENT CONTENT, GORE AND LANGUAGE.

Under 17 Requires Accompanying Parent or Adult Guardian

BY BJ COLANGELO

Izzy Lee Rises from the HOUSE of ASHES

If you've sat through a short film block at a genre fest anytime in the last decade, you've encountered the fearless vision of Izzy Lee. With more than twenty short films to her name, she's a mainstay on "Horror Directors to Watch" lists and the kind of talent horror journalists name-drop when execs claim they're "looking for fresh perspectives." Lee's films are assertive, unapologetic, and razor-sharp, the result of a woman who is confident in her voice and unafraid to use it.

Calling her films "political" is accurate, but her no-nonsense approach to storytelling has drawn people across the globe to her work like moths to a flame, and carved out a space of her own in the genre world while keeping the easily-intimidated running scared. It's that energy that inspired *The Black Phone* producer and *Sinister* co-writer C. Robert Cargill and Jessica Cargill to join Lee's debut feature film, *House of Ashes*, as producers.

"Izzy is one of my favorite artists I've met on the genre film fest circuit," C. Robert Cargill tells me. "She has an unbreakable spirit that I really admire." While Cargill has experienced the kind of success most people only dream of, he's not lost sight of how tough the industry continues to be. "It's very hard for women to break into Hollywood, and for as long as I've known her, she has absolutely refused to take no for a fucking answer," he says. "When she was ready to dive

THE *HOUSE OF ASHES* CREW PREPARES THE SHOT; MARC (VINCENT STALBA) PREPARES TO GIVE ADAM (MASON CONRAD) ONE.

into a feature, Jess and I were ready to be right there and have her back. And she crushed it. Just like we knew she would."

Crowdfunding was always the "last resort," as Lee was unwilling to make a feature unless her team could be paid fairly. "I needed more capital, so I bit the bullet and went and did it," Lee tells me. *House of Ashes* was chosen as a Kickstarter "Project We Love," but it was still nerve-wracking. "It lights your nervous system on fire for a month, and I don't recommend it," Lee says with a smirk. "But when you are pitching to industry dudes for, I don't know, six, seven years? You have to say like, 'All right, when the fuck does this end?' So I went and got it." In the end, 306 Kickstarter backers pledged $40,728 to make the film a reality.

Lee's short films have covered a variety of hot-button issues, but *House of Ashes* was the first that demanded the feature film treatment. "I'm a genre filmmaker," she declares. "What we do is filter the horror of the world, the real-life horrors, into images – into a form of entertainment." The real-life horrors of the 2010s drew her to genre filmmaking in the first place, but Lee is proving to be unfortunately prophetic. In *House of Ashes*, she and co-writer Steve Johanson tell the story of Mia, a grieving widow sentenced to house arrest for having a miscarriage. Her opportunistic new boyfriend, Marc (Vincent Stalba), moves in to keep her company, but the pair experience psychological and supernatural horrors from which Mia legally cannot escape.

"When we were writing it, criminalizing women for the very, *very* common occurrence of having a miscarriage wasn't really happening, and then in pre-production we heard of a story or two, and then when we were filming, it just kept fucking happening," Lee says. *House of Ashes* was supposed to be a glimpse of a conceivable *Twilight Zone*-esque future, but reality caught up with her imagination sooner than anyone could have anticipated.

"Mia comes from a part of me that is grieving the experience of living in a woman's skin," she explains. "It is a hard thing to experience [...]so it is a very cathartic thing to have done." Actress Fayna Sanchez (*Creepshow*, *Abraham's Boys*, *Tenants*) beautifully portrays Mia, who, like Lee, was another festival darling long overdue for the spotlight. Fellow filmmaker Kevin Sluder caught Jack Bennett's short film *A Good Scream* at the Screamfest Horror Film Festival and was so blown away by Sanchez's performance that he recommended her to Lee.

Sanchez has been acting for nearly twenty years, but, like Lee, it's unbelievable that she'd not yet led a feature. "I was so excited that my first leading role was going to be her first feature," Sanchez tells me. "When we first met and we talked about that, that was something that I was like, 'Hell yeah, what a cool opportunity for us to have this parallel path together.' So, that's something that actually got me even more excited to join."

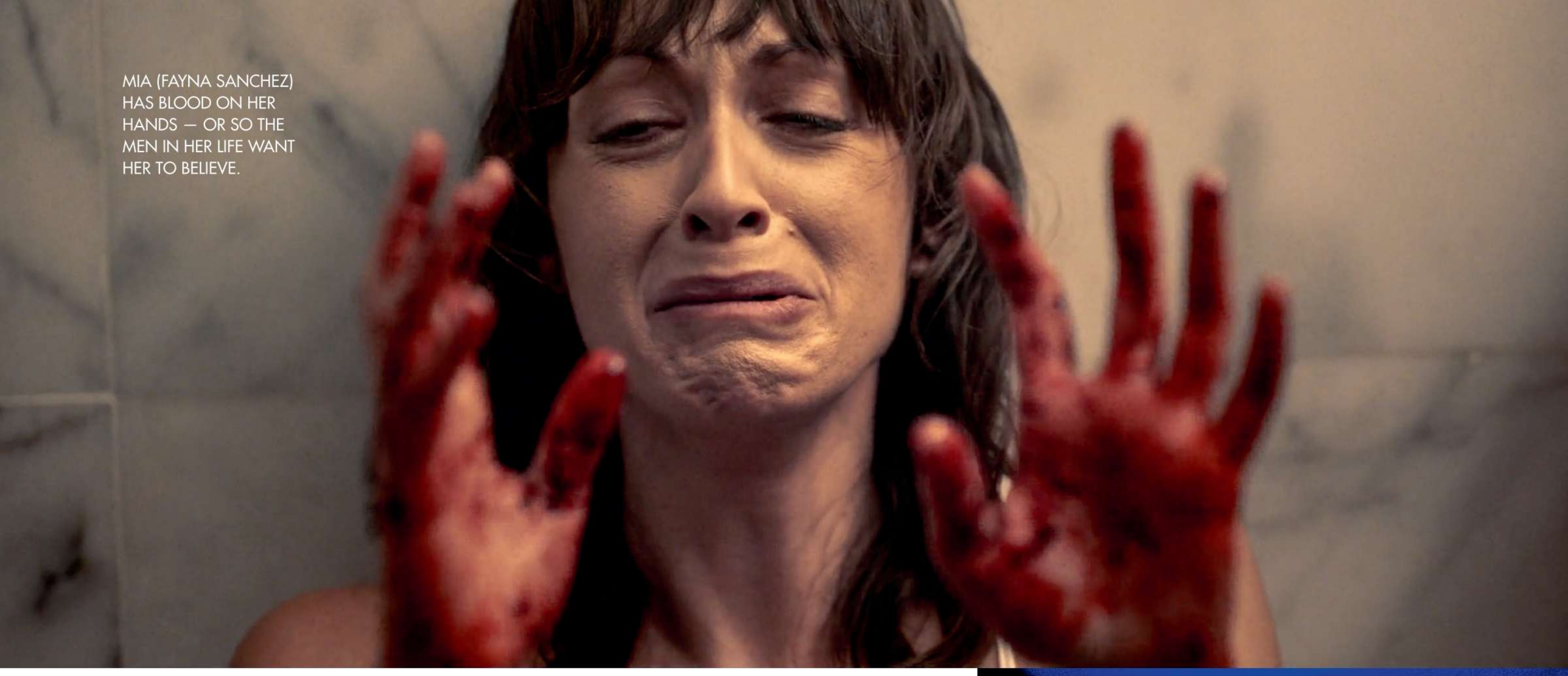
Sanchez is also politically mindful – a major factor in her signing on to play Mia. "To have it be about something that I feel this strongly about felt like I hit the lottery," Sanchez says. "What a gift to put my rage somewhere. What a gift to be able to talk about something that is very literally happening."

In lesser hands, *House of Ashes* risks feeling like an after school special, but thanks to Lee's phantasmagorical and supernatural approach to processing the themes, audiences can unpack their feelings about Mia's circumstances from a safe distance. "If I had made a straight drama, I don't think it would have worked half as well without the surrealism, and the metaphors, and the nice little revenge we get at the end," Lee explains.

Capturing her vision is *House of Ashes*' director of photography, Sophia Cacciola, who has served in the same capacity on several of Lee's shorts. "That's why I say I feel like I won the lottery because my first feature is a female lead talking about female topics

MASON IS A NIGHTMARISH PRESENCE IN *HOUSE OF ASHES*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NIHIL NOCTEM FILMS / BTS PHOTOS: BY PHOTOS BY IZZY LEE

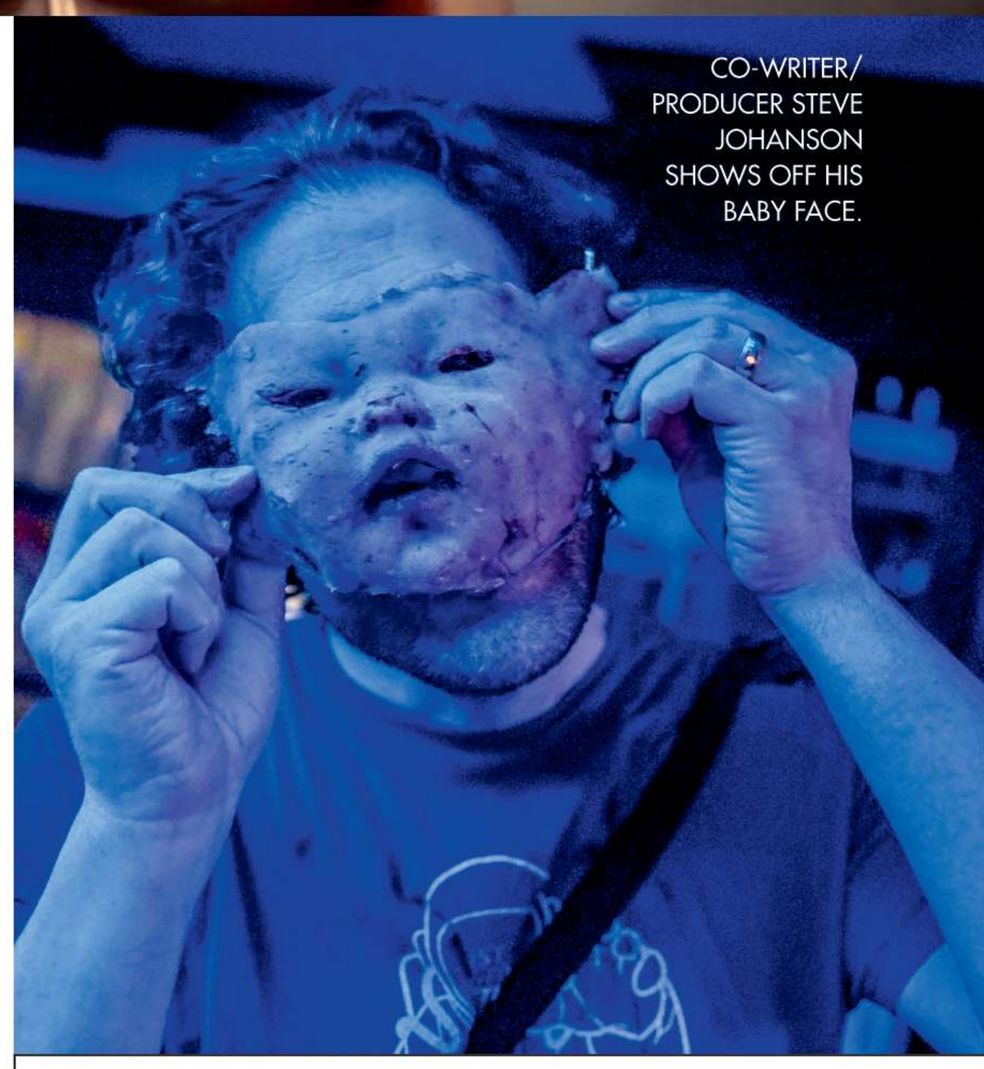


MIA (FAYNA SANCHEZ) HAS BLOOD ON HER HANDS — OR SO THE MEN IN HER LIFE WANT HER TO BELIEVE.

that don't get talked about in media very often, directed by a woman, and then shot by a woman," Sanchez gushes. "Some of those scenes were really challenging emotionally, but to have an unspoken understanding of what we're trying to do was a level of trust that I feel really grateful for, because she helped me be in a place where I could do my work."

The work has done more than scare audiences – it's also connected on deeply personal levels, bringing the *House of Ashes* team to tears after screenings around the globe as audiences shared the ways their own lived experiences were reflected on screen. "That's why I do this [...] If I never make another feature, I at least have succeeded in connecting to someone," Lee tells me through tears.

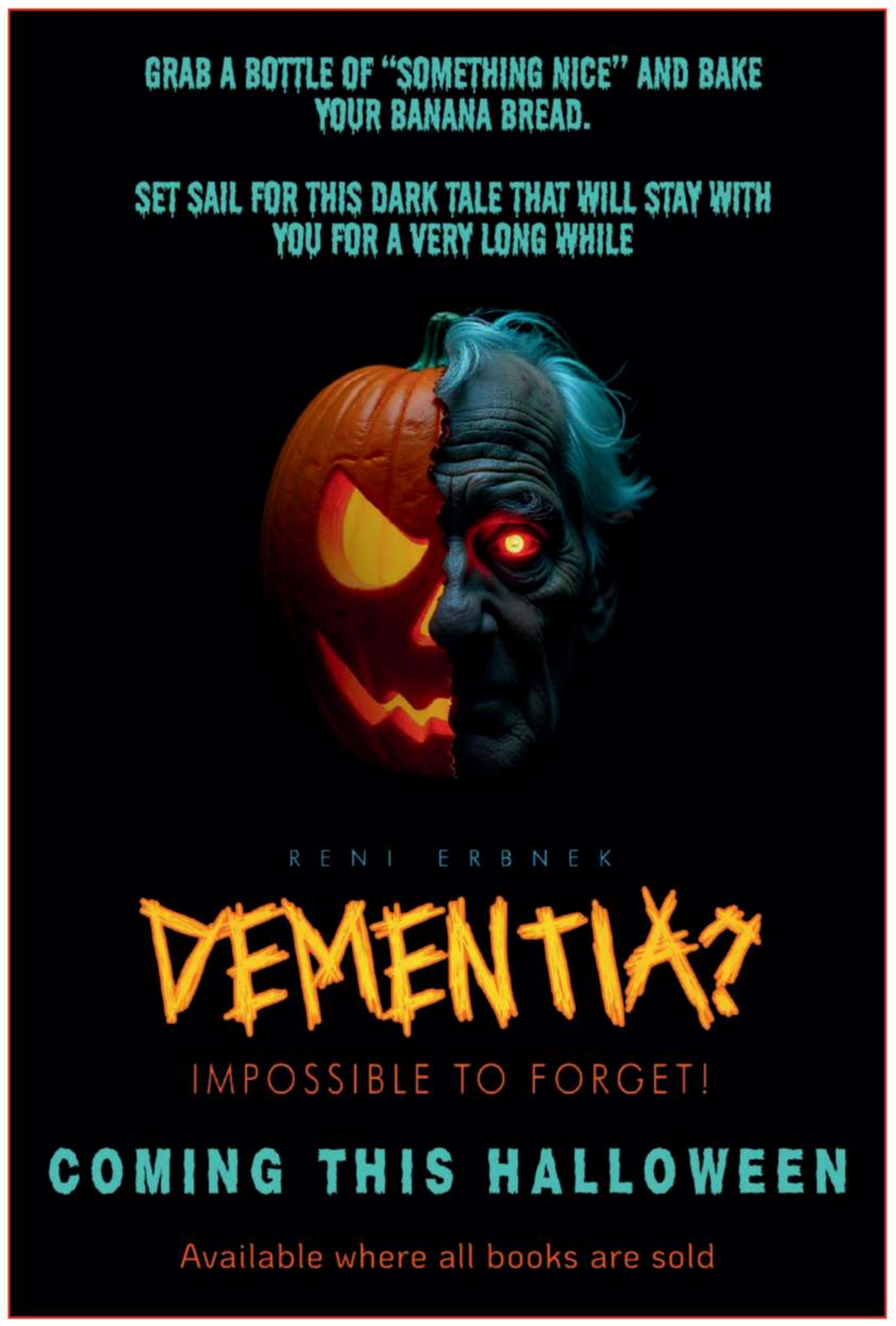
Women filmmakers, especially in a genre like horror, are given a million reasons to give up and stop destroying themselves to make their art, but Izzy Lee is a true genre journeyist, willing to wear as many hats as possible to present her work to the world. "I can't stop, because this is my therapy – because I need this," Lee tells me. "And I do this out of need, love, and frankly, out of spite sometimes. I am the bitch who won't go away," she laughs. "I'm hoping to have more conversations with people in the industry with power, and hopefully get the next one started sooner than later... and if no one wants to support me, then I'll fucking figure it out."



CO-WRITER/ PRODUCER STEVE JOHANSON SHOWS OFF HIS BABY FACE.

PHOTOS (MIDDLE RIGHT & BOTTOM RIGHT) BY IZZY LEE, (BOTTOM LEFT BY ALEXANDRIA PEREZ

DIRECTOR IZZY LEE FILLS A TEA KETTLE WITH BLOOD. WE'RE SURE SHE HAD HER REASONS. LAURA DROMERICK SEEMS EXCITED, AT ANY RATE.


GRAB A BOTTLE OF "SOMETHING NICE" AND BAKE YOUR BANANA BREAD.
SET SAIL FOR THIS DARK TALE THAT WILL STAY WITH YOU FOR A VERY LONG WHILE
RENI ERBNEK
DEMENTIA?
IMPOSSIBLE TO FORGET!
COMING THIS HALLOWEEN
Available where all books are sold

Monster Maker

By Michael Gingold

LEGENDARY FILMMAKER GUILLERMO DEL TORO FINALLY BRINGS A LONG-GESTATING CREATION TO LIFE IN *Frankenstein*.

In a sense, Guillermo del Toro has been making *Frankenstein* for his entire film career. "You can see threads of *Frankenstein* in all my other movies," he says. "It's in *Cronos*, very clearly, in the makeup on Federico Luppi. And in *Blade II*, there's the subplot with the engineered vampiric son coming back to his father. You can find it everywhere in my movies." Now he is finally poised to unleash his own version of Mary Shelley's classic novel – a genre fan's dream marriage of director and material.

Del Toro's *Frankenstein*, which he also wrote and begins streaming on Netflix in November following a premiere at this August's Venice Film Festival and a limited theatrical run, stars Oscar Isaac as the obsessed scientist and Jacob Elordi as his creation. It's the culmination of del Toro's longstanding determination to put his own cinematic stamp on this seminal tale of the tragic, horrific consequences of playing God – a project he's been developing for two decades (see sidebar) and thinking about longer than that.

DIRECTOR GUILLERMO DEL TORO STEPS IN TO COACH OSCAR ISAAC'S VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN ON HIS NEEDLEWORK.

When did you first see or read *Frankenstein*, and what was its early impact on you?

I saw the Boris Karloff movie by James Whale on a Sunday. We would go to church in the morning, and then we would see monster movies all afternoon. And they were on TV, on Channel 6 in my hometown. I must have been no older than 7 or 8, and *Frankenstein* immediately became my favorite film in general, and one of my top three Universal monsters for the rest of my life. The Creature from the Black Lagoon, the Phantom of the Opera, and Frankenstein's Monster were the Holy Grails when I was growing up.

When did you first read Shelley's novel, and were you surprised to find how different it was from the Karloff film?

PHOTOS BY KEN WORONER, COURTESY OF NETFLIX

DR. FRANKENSTEIN EYES HIS TOWERING CREATION (JACOB ELORDI, PRESUMABLY). PERSONALLY I'D HAVE STARTED WITH A MORE MANAGEABLE LITTLE FELLA.

Yeah, I read it as a paperback I got from Spain, and I was just as transfixed as when I saw the movie, but I thought, 'My God, nobody has done *this* movie.' The book has a beauty and sense of loss and the poetic point of view of the Creature out in the world, learning the basics of life and philosophy and existence. At that point in my life, I thought this was the most amazing book I had ever read. I was already an avid reader at age 11, and I felt a kinship with Mary Shelley. It was crazy; I felt like we were separated at birth! She and the Brontë sisters were twin souls for me.

When did you start seriously developing a film version of *Frankenstein*?

I'd wanted to make it since I was doing Super 8 movies as a kid, but I believe it was in 1999 or 2000 that I started trying to develop it formally. Then around the first few years of the new century, I was officially in development. I think Universal was the first place that decided to give me a shot at it. I explored some concepts for the monster that were very different from the ones we have now. We wanted to create a Creature close to the Bernie Wrightson drawings [from a reissue of Shelley's novel]. Bernie came on board and did some designs; we were trying to make him asymmetrical, with one longer arm and this and that.

"IT'S NOT A HORROR MOVIE, BECAUSE EVERYTHING THAT HAS BEEN DONE AS HORROR IN THE PAST, I DO FOR JOY HERE."

- Guillermo del Toro

FRANKENSTEIN GOES SHOPPING FOR PARTS ON THE BATTLEFIELD.

How has the project and your approach to it changed over the years from then to now?

Well, it changed with me. I always wanted to present the point of view of the creator, as the father, and the point of view of the Creature, as the son. I was very intrigued by the Catholic streak I saw in the mythology, and by the fairy-tale aspects of it. So those three things were always the pillars of the story. But for many years, I was just the son of my father, and then I became a father myself, and I was able to feel that connection when you become your father, and you look in the mirror and say, 'Oh, everything I was not going to do, I did; everything I said he did wrong, I did wrong.' The story became even more personal, if such a thing is possible.

Originally, Doug Jones was going to play the Creature, and it wound up being Jacob Elordi. Is this a different kind of performance than Jones would have given?

It changed enormously. Doug is a terrific actor, but he has a very strong register in the quality of his voice and the elegance of his movements. He brings beauty to it, and the concept of the Creature eventually needed a commitment to start with a blank, almost like a baby or an animal that has no concept of good and evil, and little by little develops into an adult human being. Also, when I needed to start working for the long term, preparing concepts of the Creature, Doug was very much booked for movies and TV series, and I decided to go outside my comfort zone and cast an actor who would accompany me on a much more complicated journey with the Creature.

Andrew Garfield was on board at one point to play the role before Elordi took over. Did your concept and approach to the character change with that recasting?

Yes, of course it did. We had the two industry strikes in the middle of preparing this movie, so all Andrew's commitments started to bump into each other. We had about nine weeks before the start of production to recast the part, and I spoke with Jacob, and we immediately clicked. We then dedicated a great deal of preproduction to sculpting, molding and all that, and we also studied *butoh*, the Japanese theatrical form, as part of the language of the Creature. We had deeper talks about how he would move when he was a blank; there's a quality to the Creature at first that is endearing, because he is just a pure newborn. And then, when he deals with anger, he does it in an almost infantile way, like a majestic lion that will tear your arm off one second and then be licking its paw or looking calmly at a sunset. Part of what *butoh* does is allow you to transition from one state to another, from fire to wind to water to rage to harmony.

Jacob had a couple of months to prepare, and I had a couple of months to rewrite the Creature to suit him. Jacob is over 6-feet-5, and I could use his physicality a little differently, both to make the Creature defenseless and to make him formidable.

What made Oscar Isaac the right actor for Victor Frankenstein?

The book's subtitle is *The Modern Prometheus*, and I wanted the movie to feel not like a period piece, but almost contemporary, with a vibrant and crazy rock-star vibe from Victor Frankenstein. He's an iconoclast at medical school, and we [del Toro and costume designer Kate Hawley] designed his wardrobe as if it was the Rolling Stones in Soho in 1970 – crushed velvet, some heel on the boots, a beautiful wide-brimmed hat; he could easily be in Chelsea or Soho at the height of the British Invasion.

When I met Oscar, I met a twin soul. I really connected with him, and I said, 'I'm going to write Victor for you.' Victor is a very compelling figure, very Byronian, very seductive; he is high on his own supply, he dreams without dreaming of any consequence. And Oscar has this passion, this drive. I

HOW DID DR. FRANKENSTEIN FINANCE HIS UNHOLY EXPERIMENTS? FOOT PICS, OBVIOUSLY.

IT'S GOTTA BE A HORRIBLE STINKY MESS UNDER THAT GRATED FLOOR. SMART DESIGN, THOUGH.

didn't want to do the crazy scientist, the mad scientist; I wanted him to be a genius, a guy who pushes boundaries and doesn't mind if he breaks a few things on the way to success.

Mia Goth, who plays Elizabeth, is so perfectly suited for your kind of cinema, it's kind of surprising you haven't worked with her before.

Yeah, and again, once I met with her, I wrote the part for her. Mia also makes it modern, and Elizabeth is the most modern of all the characters. She's a woman who moves, talks, and thinks in a very challenging way to the men around her, and Mia had that beautiful string of characters in *X* and *Pearl* and *MaXXXine*. She came to my attention through those movies; my daughter and my wife told me I should watch *Pearl* and thought Mia would be perfect for this, and from the moment I saw that movie, I thought, 'Oh my God, I don't know how she built this character, but I want to work with her.' When we met, she had recently given birth to her baby daughter, and was talking about her with great tenderness, and I thought that was the energy I needed, the energy of nurturing and love and compassion and empathy that Elizabeth would feel.

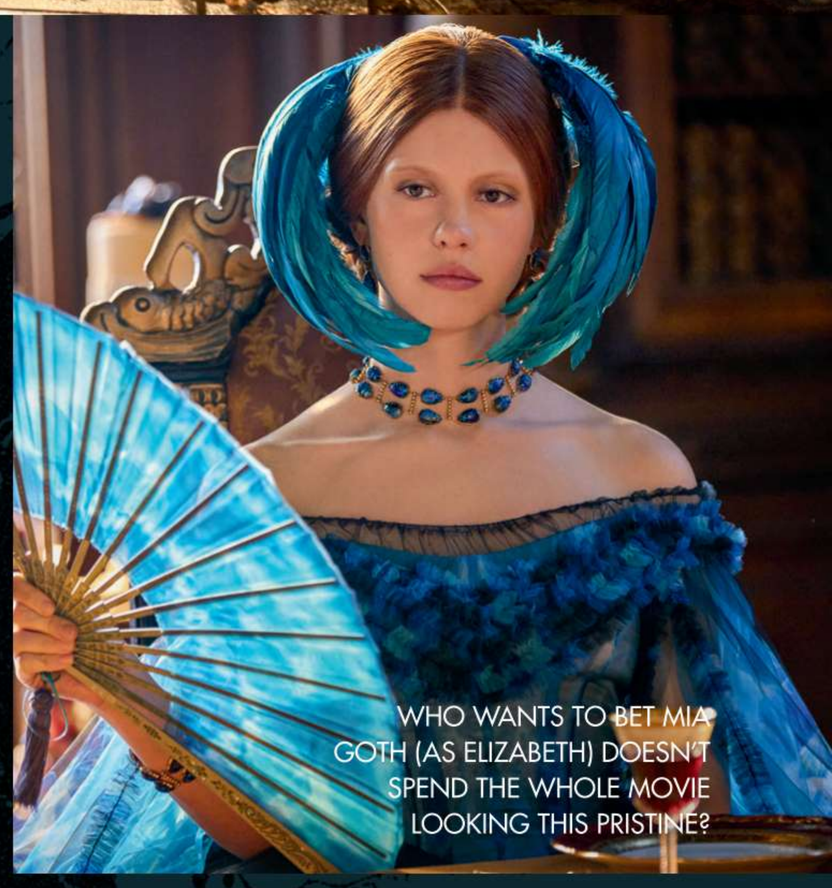
Who did your makeup effects?

Mike Hill (*The Shape of Water*, *Nightmare Alley*), who is one of the biggest Frankenstein-philes in the world. We didn't want to do scars and sutures and clamps. The approach to Frankenstein's monster is often that he looks like a cadaver, or an accident victim. We wanted to show somebody who had been born anew, so we used a very delicate palette of alabaster and oyster greys and blues and faint purples, to give him the look of something translucent, and sort of newborn. Instead of the scars, there's an almost beautiful, streamlined design to the sutures that doesn't evidence the threads or anything that looks like a repair. It feels almost like a designer's dream, because we wanted Victor to be creating a new human being, not something he repurposed from the junkpile, you know?

At the same time, we tried to make sense of why he uses so many parts. Why doesn't he just resurrect a corpse, you know? And the way I made that logical was to say that the parts come from a battlefield, so how can Victor make them flow into each other beautifully? He would think about that; he's an artist. The Creature was designed almost like a sculptural object; he's fascinating, and almost more beautiful than a normal human being.

I've heard that you don't consider this a horror film or a monster movie, so how would you place it within the genre?

It is a monster movie, but it's not a horror movie, because everything that has been done as horror in the past, I do for joy here. Like the creation of the Creature, which I detail with anatomical moments and medical moments, very much unafraid of blood



WHO WANTS TO BET MIA GOTH (AS ELIZABETH) DOESN'T SPEND THE WHOLE MOVIE LOOKING THIS PRISTINE?

and guts and all that – but I orchestrate it like a joyous dance. I told Oscar, 'This is Victor giving a concert. This is Leonard Bernstein conducting an orchestra, this is Rick Wakeman playing the keyboards in front of an audience.' We didn't do it with dark shadows. So I don't think my *Frankenstein* is a horror movie, but it's definitely a monster movie, 100 percent.

For other people who are *Frankenstein*-philes, and love the Whale movies and the Hammer films, what will be the most surprising thing about your *Frankenstein*?

Absolutely everything! This is not a homage, this is not a cinephile's movie. This is entirely autobiographical for me, in the sense that it's infused with my DNA and my own personal story. Whatever you think you're going to see, you're going to see something different! 💀

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

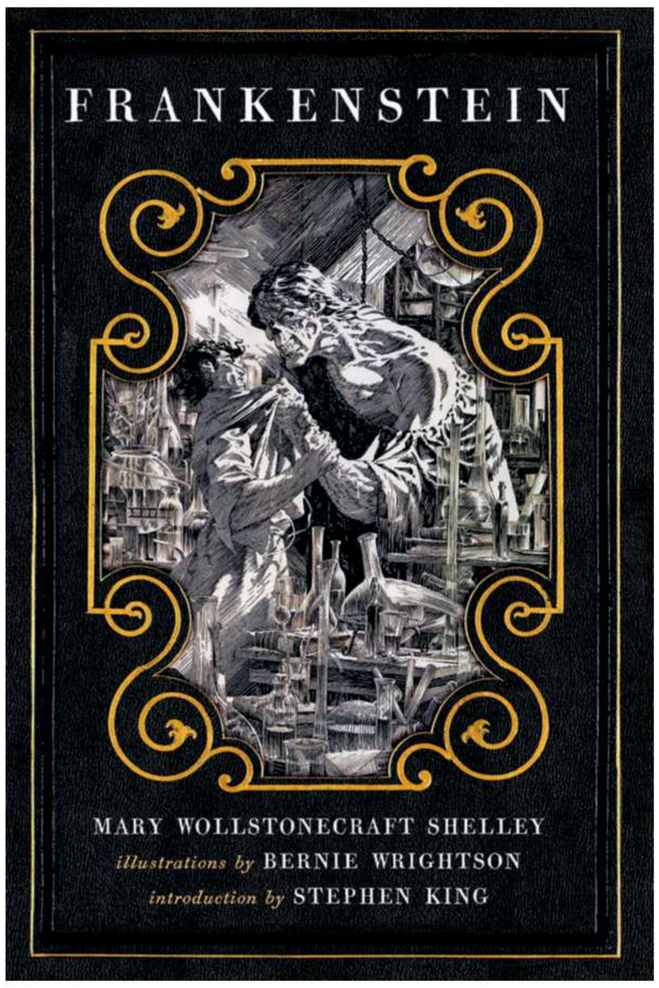
Frankenstein Unmade

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD

In 2010, Guillermo del Toro and his FX team were already a few years into prepping *Frankenstein*, in which his longtime collaborator Doug Jones was set to play the monster. "We started the makeup development three years ago, based on [veteran horror artist] Bernie Wrightson's design," he said. "God willing, Bernie will be the main conceptual designer of the film — the sets, everything. Based on Bernie's art and Doug's scans, we created a prototype maquette, and then we sculpted the entire suit. We're just waiting to start real preproduction on the movie, in order to sort of amortize the tests; we're going to do full-body makeup tests with Doug to try to solve all the particularities of the prosthetics and suit.

"For those who know Bernie's creature," seen in an illustrated edition of Shelley's novel first released by Marvel Comics in 1983, "it's similar, except it's far more lanky, and terrifying in a different way. It's not exactly his monster; he did some alterations, we did some alterations, and it looks very cool, like nothing you've ever seen before."

As fitting as it was that the man who enacted *Pan's Labyrinth*'s Faun and Pale Man, *Hellboy*'s Abe Sapien *et al.* would be inside the gruesome getup, del Toro revealed that Jones hadn't begun preparation of his own for the role. "Doug is barely aware that we're going to do it!" the director laughed. "I mean, I told him vaguely and he said yes vaguely, but you know, when the time comes, he's gonna get in that suit



and he's gonna do it!" Sadly, it was not to be, as this first incarnation of del Toro's *Frankenstein* was put on hold by Universal; Jones asserted that this was due to the studio's burgeoning plans for its doomed "Dark Universe" film series. Today, we can gaze upon Wrightson's art, imagine Jones in makeup based on it, and envision what might have been... 💀

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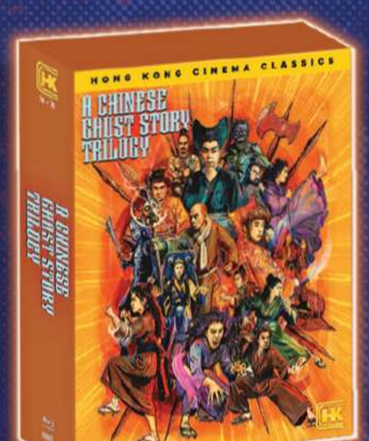

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THE TWISTED HISTORY LESSON THAT IS

CRONOS

THE NEW DAWN

BY RYAN SCOTT

THE FOLKS AT BLOOBER TEAM MADE A DISTINCTLY POLISH GAME ABOUT A DISTINCTLY POLISH PLACE.

They say that truth is stranger than fiction. In the case of *Cronos: The New Dawn*, the new survival horror game from Polish developer Bloober Team, this nightmarish time travel tale is undoubtedly strange. Yet, it's also rooted in the truth. Underneath the monsters, the architecture locked in time and the twists of its story, there lies a real-world foundation to this work of interactive horror fiction.

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In *Cronos*, players take on the role of the Traveler, who is tasked with scouring the Giger-esque wastelands of the future in search of time rifts to return to 1980s Poland. In the past, players witness a world in the throes of a cataclysmic event known only as "The Change," which forever altered humanity.

"The Traveler, we started with that," Wojciech Piejko, the game's co-director said during a tour of Nowa Huta, a district on the edges of Kraków that inspired *Cronos*. Bloober knew they wanted to use Poland's history as a narrative touchpoint, but with a twist. "Let's tell alternative history when, at the beginning of the '80s, the world ends."

In the late 1940s, post-war Poland was under communist regime, and Nowa Huta – which means "New Steelworks" – was established as a massive industrial complex designed to increase steel production. It remains an unusual place with a history unlike any other.

"We could tell a story about New York or Los Angeles, but we don't know New York or Los Angeles as good as developers from the U.S.," said Bloober Team CEO Piotr Babieno. "The mood is connected with us because we are able to show you this new vision, in a new way which will be attractive for someone who has never been in Poland before."

Nowa Huta's Communist beginnings add "layers of fear," as Babieno puts it. "Those layers of fear, in fact, which we created will not be visible for everyone. But I think that the mood will give vibes which we wouldn't be able to use if we are creating our game in Warsaw," he added.

Our tour of Nowa Huta was rather eye-opening. Everything looks frozen in time, though with shades of modern life. A wartime tank sits by a building as Ubers cruise by. The bulk of the game was inspired by the steelworks, which employed much of the district when it was still a beacon for the Communist government. Our guide told us that 40,000 people once worked there, producing tons and tons of steel.

We were treated to thorough tours of the foundry and administrative buildings. Communism is sold on the notion of equality but, in telling fashion, the administrative building is far nicer than the worker's buildings. "Equal and more equal," our tour guide says.

"It will be something strange and different to put a sci-fi character inside of it," Piejko said. "We can use Nowa Huta, the district and the steelworks. That it's made as a separate city in the past, it's like some kind of utopia and great brutalistic architecture, [so] we can go even further than only housing projects."

FROZEN IN TIME: A COMMUNICATION STATION IN NOWA HUTA LOOKS JUST AS IT DID 40 YEARS AGO.

(THIS PAGE AND FACING) *CRONOS: THE NEW DAWN* PRESENTS A HELLISH ALTERNATE HISTORY.

There is an eeriness to the steelworks. The paint is discolored from years of heavy pollution. There is a massive bomb shelter like something in a *Fallout* game. There is a large "book of accidents" from when the steelworks were active. There are maps to show where dangerous chemicals and other substances are housed, should disaster strike. It's equal parts fascinating and unnerving, not unlike *Cronos*.

"It works perfectly with twisting the history of events," said Jacek Zięba, the game's other co-director. "In Poland there was a martial law introduced – the military took over. For us it was, 'Okay, what if this happened because there is The Change? A disease that is destroying humanity?'"

Playing the game after experiencing Nowa Huta first-hand, it's easy to see how it exists as a love letter of sorts to this place that has, in recent years, been reclaimed by its people. The district now has 20,000 people living in it. There is a liveliness and sense of pride about it. *Cronos* feels like a part of that reclamation. Zięba lovingly described it as "Polish as fuck." They use Polish language (with translations) to make it feel "weird." They began to view that weirdness as a tool for horror-building. It's meant to feel "alien" to anyone not from Poland.

Several of Bloober Team's previous games, such as *The Medium* and *Observer*, were also set in Poland. The company is also riding high from the success of the recent *Silent Hill 2* remake. But *Cronos* is "the biggest game we've ever made," Piejko said.

"We started to become professionals at re-creating Poland in games," said Grzegorz Like, the game's writer. Like is actually from Nowa Huta, a "9-minute walk" away from the steelworks. For him, it was more personal. "The level of replication is stunning," he said. "Writing a story that is located in the town you live, it's just like Stephen King. He never did a story that happens on the fucking moon."

Making *Cronos* personal wasn't an "ego decision," however. "It rhymed with the themes of the story we wanted to tell," Like said. "It all just clicked."

What's striking about Nowa Huta to an outsider is how much the horrors of the past are still imprinted on the place. When the factories were eventually closed, there was mass unemployment, as the steelworks were at the center of the whole district. People were stripping copper wire and other valuables in an effort to secure their future. Our guide shared some wisdom from that time saying, "Everyone has to take the same amount, and no one is guilty."

"Our '80s were very different from the Western world," Piejko explained. "It was a struggle. It wasn't a nice time."

'80s nostalgia has been hip in pop culture for several years now. In some ways, *Cronos* is jumping on that train, but don't expect to see Walkmans and hear hair metal over the loud speaker. "It's the weird cousin of the '80s," Zięba said.

Like added, "We all grew up on horror movies from the '80s." The team cited some influences from around that time, such as John Carpenter's *The Thing* and Ridley Scott's *Alien*. It's easy to feel those inspirations in the game itself.

Bloober Team may have scored a huge hit with *Silent Hill 2*, but they aren't content to capitalize on pre-existing success. "We are not able to work on a game which is not meaningful to us," Babieno said. "That's why the decision of creating *Cronos* was easy."

"We are trying to make Bloober Team as a horror brand for decades and to make it happen, we need to create games which we will be really proud of," he added.

For many players, this will be a larger exposure to Poland than they're likely to get anywhere else in mainstream global media. Even so, the team didn't necessarily feel any pressure to make it a history lesson. "Cronos doesn't have ambitions to be a historical game," Like said. "It wasn't our mission, but I think by staying true to ourselves, we won't be ashamed of anything."

"We didn't start this project, or any before it, thinking, 'We need to put Poland on the map,' but I think we are proud of each title. That it clicked. It works," Piejko said. "People can just know more about Poland, Krakow and now Nowa Huta. I think people from Nowa Huta are just mind blown that this is happening here, now." 💀

Cronos: The New Dawn *is available now for console and PC.*

PHOTOS BY RYAN SCOTT, GAME IMAGES COURTESY OF BLOOBER TEAM

IN *THE RUNNING MAN*, GLEN POWELL PLAYS BEN RICHARDS, A CHARACTER FIRST ADAPTED TO SCREEN BY ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER IN 1987.

BORN TO RUN: EDGAR WRIGHT MANIFESTS THE RUNNING MAN

THE FILMMAKER TALKS ABOUT ADAPTING STEPHEN KING'S DYSTOPIAN NIGHTMARE THIS YEAR, OF ALL YEARS.

BY MEREDITH BORDERS

"IN THE YEAR 2025, THE BEST MEN DON'T RUN FOR PRESIDENT. THEY RUN FOR THEIR LIVES..."

If you crack open your old *Bachman Books* paperback and flip to the title page for *The Running Man*, those words will stare up at you, big as life and twice as ugly.

"The irony was not lost," says director Edgar Wright about revisiting that line while preparing to release *The Running Man* in 2025.

Stephen King wrote *The Running Man* as his alter ego Richard Bachman in 1982. The book follows the unemployed and impoverished Ben Richards in an alternate future of 2025 – although now that we've actually reached 2025, it's safe to say that future wasn't as alternate as one might have hoped. Richards is living in a totalitarian society fragmented by severe class divisions, where the government placates the unhappy masses with round-the-clock media distractions.

"The thing that I maybe couldn't have predicted back when I [read it as] a teenager was how timely and prescient the book would be," Wright says, and we both sigh.

Richards' daughter Cathy is mortally ill from the flu, and his wife Sheila is prepared to sell her body to pay for Cathy's medicine. Out of desperation, he applies at the Games Network, looking to join one of the dehumanizing televised competitions that serve as entertainment. He doesn't expect to be cast in *The Running Man*, the Network's most popular and deadliest game.

The rules are simple, and all he has to do is survive; his family gets $100 for every hour that he does so. Of course, the entire world is after him, with viewers rewarded for information about his whereabouts, in addition to a team of elite hunters that are sent to collect him. If he survives 30 days, he'll receive one billion dollars.

No contestant on The Running Man has lasted longer than eight days.

If this doesn't sound much like the plot of the 1987 film *The Running Man* starring Arnold Schwarzenegger as Richards, it shouldn't. Though ostensibly an adaptation, that movie – still a cult favorite for its cool retro-future aesthetics and excellent choreography by Paula Abdul – has very little in common with King's book. Wright's film will hew much more closely to the source.

"I was always aware that it was a book that hadn't been that faithfully adapted, and that there was a different story that could be brought to the screen," Wright says. In 2017, when a Twitter follower asked Wright what remake he would most like to do, Wright answered *The Running Man*. Hollywood was listening.

"I always had that in the back of my head over the years, probably since *Hot Fuzz*. I'd even inquired about it before, but there had been various rights issues," he recalls. When producer Simon Kinberg was brought on to develop a new adaptation of King's novel at Paramount, he remembered the Twitter exchange and reached out to Wright to see if he still had interest. "And I said, 'Absolutely I do.' So it was all kind of a strange, miraculous thing of it just coming into my inbox and me grabbing the opportunity with both hands."

The Ben Richards of the book is lanky, scrawny, with "a cheap bowl haircut and sunken eyes." The Ben

"KING HAS SEVERAL TIMES IN HIS CAREER BEEN LIKE NOSTRADAMUS, AND THIS BOOK IS NO EXCEPTION. IT'S SHOCKING AND SAD HOW MUCH OF THE 1982 NOVEL STILL RINGS TRUE TODAY."

- EDGAR WRIGHT -

PHOTOS BY ROSS FERGUSON, COURTESY OF PARAMOUNT PICTURES

WHY OH WHY WOULD A FILMMAKER CAST LEE PACE (AS HUNTER EVAN MCCONE) ONLY TO KEEP HIM IN A MASK FOR THE ENTIRE FILM? WATCH *THE RUNNING MAN* TO FIND OUT!

COLMAN DOMINGO IS IMPECCABLY CAST AS BOBBY THOMPSON, HOST OF THE GAME SHOW THAT HAS RICHARDS RUNNING FOR HIS LIFE.

POWELL BRINGS AN "EVERYMAN QUALITY" TO RICHARDS THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN SOMEWHAT LACKING IN SCHWARZENEGGER'S VERSION OF THE CHARACTER.

Richards of the 1987 film is, well, Arnold Schwarzenegger. Wright split the difference somewhat, with the likable Glen Powell trading in his movie star grin for haunted eyes glaring out from under a ratty hoodie. The effect is persuasive.

"What we wanted to bring to the film was more of an everyman quality – that he wasn't a pre-existing action hero or wasn't in the forces or a policeman," like Schwarzenegger's character.

Wright had seen Powell in *Top Gun: Maverick* and – perhaps more relevant, considering the wigs Richards wears to disguise himself – in *Hit Man*, "which he co-wrote, and I thought was fantastic, and so when his name came up, I thought, 'Oh, he's the perfect person to play this part right now.'" Wright points out that, though Powell has had memorable turns in action films such as *Top Gun* and *Twisters*, he hasn't yet taken on a franchise hero role that is automatically associated with his name. "So that was really exciting to me, to put an actor like that through his paces. And it's fun to see somebody like Glen, when he's not playing himself. [Richards] is tough and resourceful, but he's not perfect, and he's also flying by the seat of his pants for the entire movie."

Wright mentions as character references early John McClane and early Indiana Jones, "where they're fallible, and they make mistakes, and they're figuring out as they go along. They're not indestructible, they don't have all the answers, and there's a huge chance that they could fail and die."

Powell's in good company, with the cast rounded out by Josh Brolin as Games Network boss Dan Killian; Colman Domingo as Running Man host Bobby Thompson; Lee Pace as head hunter Evan McCone; Jayme Lawson as Sheila; Katy O'Brian as fellow contestant Laughlin; and William H. Macy (Molie), Michael Cera (Elton) and Daniel Ezra (Bradley) as citizens who help Richards while he's on the run. Bradley, in particular, is a fan favorite character, and Ezra found his way into the role in a way that would make Bradley proud.

"He did one of the best self-tapes I've ever seen where, without giving too much away, there's a scene in the film where he is putting out propaganda, and so he's doing his own home underground recordings. Daniel did his self-tape in this fashion, and I was like, 'Well, we've got to give this guy the part!' He just nailed it on his own without me directing him."

Meanwhile, Domingo and Cera were both unambiguous standouts in the trailer that was released in July. "Because Colman has a lot of Broadway and West End experience, he fell into the part of being the ringmaster very quickly," Wright says of the game show host character (notably played by actual game show host Richard Dawson in the '87 film). "He was almost like his own warm-up man [for the extras playing the Running Man audience]. By the second day, as soon as he walked on set before we'd started the cameras rolling, the audience was chanting, 'Bobby T! Bobby T!'"

Cera's character is less showy but no less fascinating, with Elton responsible for a gripping plot development in the book. "I think people will be surprised by Michael in the movie," Wright predicts. "He's a little bit of a wild card character, that's all I'll say. But I think people will really enjoy seeing him and Glen together in a very unlikely duo. It's just so fun to see those two on screen together. And also for me to work with Michael as an actor for the first time in 15 years, it was fantastic."

They first worked together, of course, on *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, the only other book adaptation (from Bryan Lee O'Malley's graphic novel series) Wright has done to this point. The films also share some of the same crew, and Wright co-wrote both movies with Michael Bacall. "They're two very different films, but the things that are similar about them is that you're gifted with a fully realized world. In the case of Bryan's book, he had all his amazing artwork and all of the detail of his version of Toronto. In this, his world is so detailed, right down to brand names and the sense of this alternate Stephen King/Richard Bachman universe. So it was really fun to tap into that."

King goes into great detail about the technology in his version of 2025, including the video tapes that Richards is supposed to mail in every day to confirm that he's still alive. While Wright confirms that "we don't say what year [the film] is set in," he adds, "In my head it was always just in an alternate 2025, because most of the technology that's in the film exists in some form, but it hasn't necessarily gone mainstream. But in a way, that's similar to our own world: there's some technology that's advanced and there's some technology that's regressed."

DIRECTOR AND CO-WRITER EDGAR WRIGHT (LEFT) REUNITED WITH *SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD* STAR MICHAEL CERA (RIGHT, AS RICHARDS' UNLIKELY ALLY ELTON).

It's a useful approach particularly when it comes to those video cassette mail drops, a crucial part of the book that could read as dated to modern audiences. "One of the initial things we thought was, 'Oh, well, obviously we can't do the mail drops and the tapes.' And then we thought, 'Well, why can't we? There's this strange resurgence in everything analog. Why don't we just tap into that?"

It's the Gartner hype cycle on a long enough timeline. "Technology that's so outdated that it's actually become exotic, you know?"

The resurgence of video tapes isn't the only thing about 2025 that King got right, of course. "We had a test screening the other day and I think I probably should have been more shocked that people were just like, 'Yep.' That's as much as there is to say, I think. Stephen King has several times in his career been like Nostradamus, and this book is no exception. It's shocking and sad how much of the 1982 novel still rings true today."

King has said that he created Richard Bachman as a place to put his grimmest, angriest stories. He called Bachman "dark-toned, despairing" – he's said he wrote as Stephen King on sunny days, and Bachman when it rained. When asked what Edgar Wright's Richard Bachman would be like, the director takes his time answering.

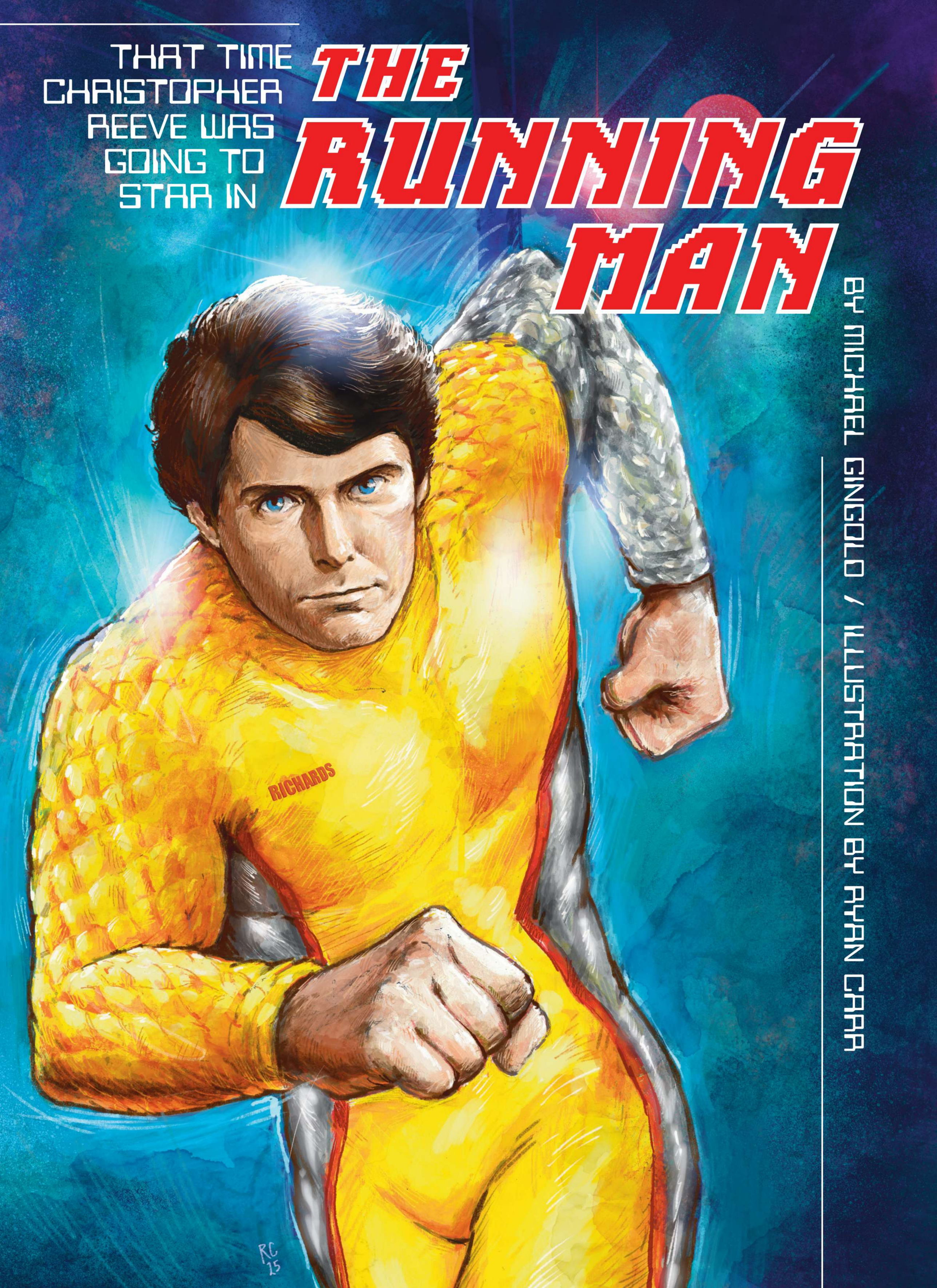
"I think I would probably be making disreputable films, like Herschell Gordon Lewis or Russ Meyer films. Films that would not go down very well, really schlocky, cult exploitation films. I mean, plenty of people I know just make those films without any kind of hang-ups, but I'm British, so..." 💀

WRIGHT PUT POWELL "THROUGH HIS PACES" DURING FILMING.

THAT TIME CHRISTOPHER REEVE WAS GOING TO STAR IN

THE RUNNING MAN

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD / ILLUSTRATION BY RYAN CARR



Edgar Wright's *The Running Man*, coming November 14, has been called a remake of the 1987 Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle, but that's not really the case. It's better described as a truer cinematic translation of the 1982 novel written by Stephen King under his "Richard Bachman" pseudonym, and has nothing to do with the costumed superheroics of that previous, very loose adaptation. Wright's film isn't the first try at a more faithful screen take on King's book, though: the Schwarzenegger version emerged at the end of a long development process that began by sticking closer to the source and would have starred a very different actor.

It all began when — depending on which account you believe — either George Linder, a wheelchair manufacturer venturing into film production, or writing partners Mel Friedman and Christopher Cosby (who would go on to co-script the Jean-Claude Van Damme flick *Bloodsport*) discovered the book, unaware of the best-selling author behind the Bachman name. Linder optioned it for $20,000 and signed with Taft Entertainment/Keith Barish Productions to make the film, and the trio co-wrote a screenplay (on which Cosby took a pseudonym of his own, "Christopher Hansen").

This script follows the basic parameters of King's novel, with a number of the characters and situations preserved. Ben Richards is a struggling everyman in a dystopian future who signs on for the Running Man TV show to get desperately needed money for his sick daughter, and becomes the target of the ruthless Evan McCone and his Hunters, as well as a populace who will be financially rewarded for turning him in. There are some significant differences, though: Ben's wife Sheila was written out and Ben and his child now live with his sister and brother-in-law, so that Ben can have a dalliance with newly created network employee Debra Hardin, who later switches allegiances and helps Ben in his fight to survive. The show's duration is shortened from 30 to 10 days, and the climax features a dogfight between Ben and the Hunters in "helijets," with a happier ending for Ben than he has in the book. The screenplay also introduces an underground resistance movement called the Voice, an idea that survived all the way to the Schwarzenegger film.

Mel Gibson was the first choice to star in this *Running Man* before the producers settled on Christopher Reeve to play Ben Richards, with Daryl Hannah announced for a co-starring role. Then the screen's reigning Superman/Clark Kent, Reeve had at the time been branching out into other sorts of roles in the likes of *Deathtrap* and *The Bostonians*, and would have been perfect as an ordinary man who has to find his inner hero under extraordinary circumstances. Tapped to direct was George Pan Cosmatos, who had helmed the international actioners *The Cassandra Crossing* and *Escape to Athena*, and production was set to begin in September 1985 on locations in Vancouver, Victoria, and Edmonton, Canada.

Earlier that year, Cosmatos' big Hollywood break, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, exploded into theaters, and during its promotional tour, he visited the West Edmonton Mall and fell in love with the huge, glass-topped structure. He planned to use the mall, which was then the largest indoor shopping complex in the world, as the site of *The Running Man*'s futuristic, domed city where the story's wealthy classes dwell. It would have been the biggest production to ever take place in Edmonton, creating hundreds of jobs and local business opportunities.

Unfortunately, such grandiose ideas for *The Running Man* would be Cosmatos' downfall. After the budget, originally set at around $12 million, ballooned under his watch, Cosmatos was dismissed from the project in August '85, and Reeve went with him. The film then went through a series of directors, including German Carl Schenkel and Brit Ferdinand Fairfax, while Steven E. De Souza was brought on board to overhaul the screenplay, with contributions along the way by *Superman*'s David Newman. "We wanted to make totalitarianism entertaining," De Souza told the *San Francisco Examiner*'s Anne Thompson. "With Reeve and Cosmatos, the movie was more allegorical. Now it's more literal." De Souza had written the Schwarzenegger-starrer *Commando*, and helped wrangle the Austrian action star to be the new Running Man.

Schwarzenegger in turn had been a fan of Andrew Davis' Chuck Norris-starrer *Code of Silence*, and thus Davis was at the helm when *The Running Man* finally rolled in September 1986. But there was one more bump in its road: After nine days of filming, Davis was let go due to creative differences with the producers and replaced with Paul Michael Glaser, who had only two days' notice to take over the helm. Ironically, given the reasons behind Cosmatos' departure, the budget eventually swelled to $27 million, and there were reports of editing-room disputes, with De Souza and producer Keith Barish weighing in on the final cut.

The 1987 *Running Man* was a modest financial success and has built a sizable fan following. A 35mm screening at Yonkers, New York's Alamo Drafthouse Cinema in 2017 — the year in which it is partially set and in which some of its visions of the future had come to pass — was especially well-received. But only now, in 2025 (the setting of King's novel), will we get to see a more accurate filmization — and can imagine how Reeve would have done in the role.

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Embracing the Gritty, DIY Mentality Of

Chainsaws Were Singing

By Michael Gingold

Sander Maran's riotous gore fest is ready to please its crowds.

This is the first time that Latvia has won an Oscar," Conan O'Brien said during this year's Academy Awards ceremony after *Flow* won Best Animated Feature. "Ball's in your court, Estonia!" This fall, Estonia lobs back hard as the gory horror/comedy/musical *Chainsaws Were Singing* carves its way into theaters and then VOD/digital platforms from Dark Star Pictures and Red Water Entertainment. A rural splatterfest in the *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* vein done in the over-the-top comedic style of early Peter Jackson, *Chainsaws Were Singing* establishes its own identity via the inclusion of romcom elements and song numbers that spoof those seen in traditional screen tuners.

(LEFT:) PEPE (RA RAGNAR NOVOD) AND KEVIN (HENRYK JOHAN NOVOD) CAME TO PARTY; (RIGHT) JAAN (JANNO PUUSEPP) AND TOM (KARL ILVES) DID NOT.

The twisted take on love-story standards is established early on by scripter/director and pseudonymous cinematographer/editor/lots of other things Sander Maran, as the meet cute between the two leads results from one of them attempting suicide. When down-on-his-luck Tom (Karl-Joosep Ilves, who concocted the story with Sander) tries to drown himself in a very shallow river, he encounters the beautiful, equally despondent Maria (Laura Niils). Just as life seems to be taking a more positive turn, Maria is kidnapped by a chainsaw-wielding cretin (Martin Ruus), and Tom sets out to rescue her, assisted by goofball Jaan (Janno Puusepp). Cue plenty of mayhem and inappropriate behavior, all done with high spirits and energy. FANGORIA talked to Sander and his brother Peeter, who was one of the producers and plays three roles in the movie, after *Chainsaws*' international premiere at last year's Fantasia International Film Festival.

After a series of short movies (including the multi-award-winning *Curiosity Kills*), Sander aspired for his feature debut to be "a fun movie that would deliver for the genre audience. We've been watching cool movies at the Haapsalu Horror and Fantasy Film Festival for about 15 years now, and we know how it feels to be with an audience where everyone is laughing. It's such great energy, so we wanted to make a film that would hit that spot. Also, one of my all-time favorite movies is *It's a Wonderful Life*, and the director, Frank Capra, had a quote: 'There are no rules in filmmaking. Only sins. And the cardinal sin is dullness.' So we wanted to make sure that each and every scene had something fun going for it."

A good deal of the fun takes the form of gory slapstick gags assaulting every human body part imaginable, all stemming from an inspiration Sander had while watching *Hobo with a Shotgun* at the Haapsalu Festival. "I had one of those moments where you're watching a genre film, and part of your mind is like, 'What could be a fun kill here?' I ended up thinking that I've never seen a horror movie where they rip someone's balls out and replace them with eyes, and then there's the one-liner, 'Oh, my eyeballs!' So I came up with that kill, and then it was, 'OK, how could we make that happen? There has to be a bad-ass killer involved. OK, so then what?' We just started developing it, and it grew into multiple storylines that all stemmed from that one inception."

The filmmaker was also influenced by past tuneful genre-blenders like *Cannibal: The Musical* (he originally titled his opus *Serial Killer: The Musical*), *Little Shop of Horrors*, and *Nudist Colony of the Dead*. "At first we thought that songs didn't cost anything," Sander laughs, "so it would be a great way to achieve production value during a scene that didn't have anything else going for it. But then we learned that yeah, they're a lot harder to produce."

Sander populated his ensemble with friends and relatives, with female lead Niils the only actor secured through a traditional casting process. He notes that he took further cues from Robert Rodriguez's book *Rebel Without a Crew*, about the creation of his handmade first feature *El Mariachi*. "He wrote, 'Just use what you have in your life.' So for me it was, 'You have a little brother? Put him in the movie. You know some twins? Put them in the movie. You have

JAN ANDRESSON IS CREDITED IN THE FILM AS "CHAINSAW ASS KILL." THAT TRACKS.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DARK STAR PICTURES

MARTIN RUUS KILLS WITH A SMILE.

a rat? Put it in the movie.' That was our approach, just reverse-engineering everything for the production, because we didn't have a budget for anything."

That included the practical gore effects created by Jan Andresson, another producer (and the man seen with a chainsaw up his butt in a widely circulated promotional photo). "There was so much blood everywhere, and it wasn't even professional fake blood," Peeter recalls. "It was syrup mixed with ketchup and all sorts of stuff. And it had this really distinct, strong smell."

To avoid real blood being shed on set, the titular weapons weren't always operational, and Sander says, "There are places where I still see that the chainsaw is not actually running. But I used the approach Tom Savini did on *Friday the 13th*, where at first, you show that it's a real thing. For example, you punch an axe into a table to establish that it's actually metal, and then you can have fun with the rubber version afterward. So in the chainsaw baby sequence, as I call it, first we had the twins saw into a chair for absolutely no reason, so later you think the saws are actually working.

"Otherwise, there were a lot of not-so-safe moments," Sander admits. "For example, during the scene where Tom climbs out of the car window, he actually did that and held onto the rail on the roof. I did the exact same thing, only from the front seat. I climbed out, but I only had one hand to hold on with because I was shooting with the other one. At one point, there were like 50 cars behind us, all honking because they were angry. And people called the police on us when we did some of the burning-car stuff."

After a shoot that encompassed a little over sixty days scattered between June and November 2013, *Chainsaws* entered an especially protracted postproduction that involved a year and a half of VFX work and two years of color correction, undertaken by Sander himself. "It was shot on the cheapest video cameras available, and there are, I believe, about three or four hundred visual effects shots, lots of sky replacements, to make it look like a real movie. I did the color correction in Adobe Premiere; there are 3,500 shots in the film, and I had to basically restore each and every one from scratch. So there'd be one layer of basic color correction, and then multiple layers of video work on top of that to get all the scratches and stuff. And I had to do it all manually. It was harrowing, but I'm so glad it paid off."

This DIY attitude was embraced by Sander and his team, who eschewed the assistance of the Estonian Film Institute. "We wanted to do it ourselves, on our own," he says, "mostly because there was so much crazy stuff in the film, we didn't even apply for funding. Back in film school, they would have these juries where you'd have to defend each and every decision you'd made on your movie, so it was liberating not having to deal with any of that." 💀

PEPE IGNORES THE OLD ESTONIAN ADAGE, "NEVER BRING A KNIFE TO A CHAINSAW FIGHT."

I WAS A ZOMBIE IN TINA ROMERO'S QUEENS OF THE DEAD

EXCITING MOVIE TIE-IN MAGAZINES!
FANGORIA
'DAY OF THE DEAD' • 'HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL'
In the Set: I Was a Zombie in 'DAY OF THE DEAD'!
"SCREAM GREATS" PULL-OUT POSTER #16 'CREEPSHOW'

BY XERO GRAVITY • PORTRAITS BY LIZ LIGUORI

A FANGO CONTRIBUTOR GOES UNDER THE GORE AND GLITTER.

I've been a club kid for almost a decade and living life as a horror junkie for double that. The genre always adapts with the times, so, yeah, I could predict an intersection where my worlds align in a delightful, dreadful and ridiculous crossover. I couldn't imagine, however, that crossover would turn out the way it did, but before we get to *Tina Romero's Queens of the Dead*, we need to take a brief look back at what came before her.

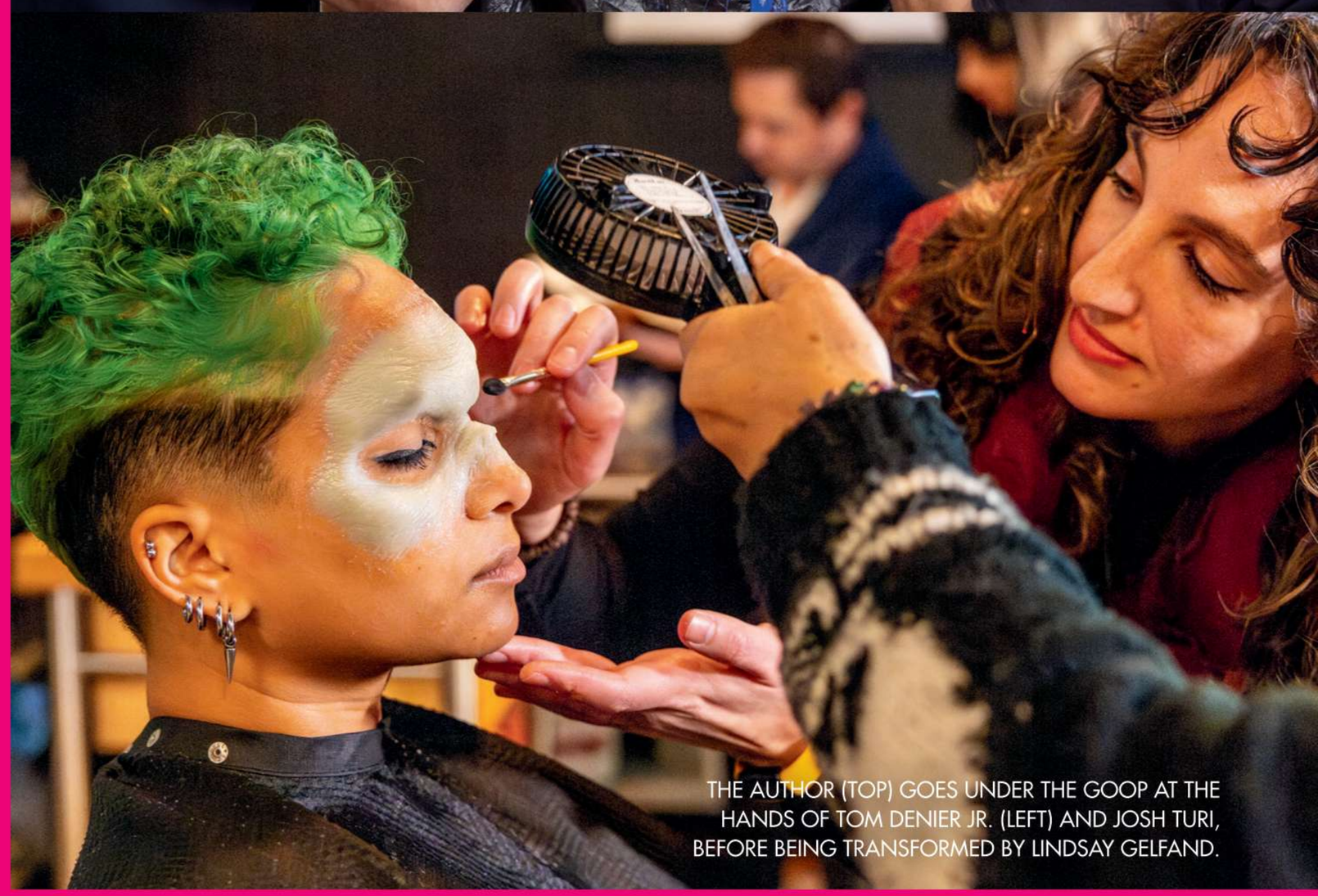
George A. Romero is the godfather of modern zombification. I'll also add "active ally" to that description for the way, as a filmmaker, he consistently embedded social commentary of the era underneath the blood 'n' guts. *Dawn Of The Dead* has always been my bag, but as a Black person in the States, my heart lies with Ben at the finale of *Night Of the Living Dead*. Civil rights, over-consumerism, military fetishization, fears of immigration... y'all know it, but something's missing from the Romero catalog of cultural critique. Something that slays in more ways than one. Get me?

Now it's 2020-something, and here comes the aforementioned rock star Tina Romero, daughter to the original zombie empire, cooking up the next chapter in Romero history. This chick spent her childhood on her father's knee, watching him make undead history. Even better? She's a club kid, too, commonly found DJing the grounds of Brooklyn's queer nightlife. If I had one, I would've thrown a backflip when the press release hit, promising fans a story of intersectional club dwellers fighting for survival at a Bushwick drag show.

In the spring of 2024, I got the call from Phil Nobile Jr., FANGORIA's Editor-in-Chief. He said something like, "They'll make you up as a zombie, throw you in a scene, and you can write about it." I'll admit those were the only details that stuck – I was already pacing up and down the back hall of my day job, practicing my zombie limp in hopes of making the final cut of *Tina Romero's Queens Of The Dead*. I've learned a ton since then, starting with the fact that limpin' ain't easy – a fact that is especially true while sporting full zombie regalia in 90-degree heat in an old New Jersey warehouse. I beg fans to respect the horde. It really is harder than it looks. Still, I felt the hottest I've ever been under all the grime and guts.

Before I hit the set, the first step towards indoctrination was a fitting for my custom zombie prosthetic. Across the bridge, I found myself at Josh Turi's makeup effects studio for a quick two-step process and a chat. He's got stories for days. I'd passively name a horror favorite, and he'd bounce back with a wild encounter from his time on that exact project. Seems like he's had his hand in the bloody bits of everything from Troma classics to the Marvel Cinematic Universe. I'm still laughing about listening to all his stories while there are dozens of molds of mutilated bodies and decapitated heads swinging from the ceiling over our heads.

The *Queens of the Dead* zombies poised a fun challenge for Turi. He explained that the makeup FX industry being dominated by men helps nobody, as the cultures of beauty and glam are equally important. With the emphasis on queer life for Tina's version of the undead, he'd done his homework by



THE AUTHOR (TOP) GOES UNDER THE GOOP AT THE HANDS OF TOM DENIER JR. (LEFT) AND JOSH TURI, BEFORE BEING TRANSFORMED BY LINDSAY GELFAND.

SET PHOTOS BY SPENCER PAZER / MAKEUP FX PHOTOS BY CHERESE LUMSDEN-WALLACE / STILLS COURTESY OF SHUDDER AND IFC FILMS

researching the techniques of drag-style makeup. The result is a sexy 50/50 combo of the Romero zombie look and classic drag realness. It fuses the notorious protruding zombie brow with the over-the-top contour lift of the drag-brow. At the end of all this, there was a chance I could resemble the jacked-up lovechild of Bub and Divine.

If we were to cut the yapping, the moldmaking process would've taken around an hour. My whole mug was covered with blue goop, which was then covered in a second SFX plaster on top to harden the cast of my face. Two little holes at my nostrils were left open, but beyond that I had fully transformed into *The Invisible Man*. It's not an easy appointment for claustrophobic folks but, according to Josh, I apparently handled the casting much better than Joe Pesci.

Less than two weeks later, I was on set. My custom prosthetic was finished and handed off to makeup department head Christina Grant, who was leader of the 'zombiteers' makeup team. She and key SFX makeup artist Lindsay Gelfand tag-teamed the application while Erin Acker, key makeup artist, came over to handle the airbrushing of my neck, ears and arms with rotting blue veins. The rest of me was painted a silver green similar to the Romero style, just a lot sparklier. My new friend "Influencer Zombie" walked past and whispered a quick "Okay, slay." I had reached to take a selfie, but the face recognition to unlock my phone had no idea who the hell I was under all that latex.

After three hours of application, I had the sublime brow line Turi had prepped me for. Christina and Lindsay placed their finishing touches while Erin admitted, "Yeah, this movie has been a full contact sport in the makeup department. We're not working with a Marvel budget, but all of the people we have are so stoked about Tina's vision. Like, artists who've worked on *American Horror Story* and *Fallout*, a bunch of incredibly talented people who all came to play with us and that means the world."

It was evident that their pseudo-locker room was coated in a thin layer of glitter, so I wasn't going to question their dedication to making everyone look impeccable. On club scene days, the zombiteers cranked out almost fifty

(TOP) YASMINE (DOMINIQUE JACKSON) GIVES A ZOMBIE THE BOOT; (MIDDLE) STUNT COORDINATOR DREW LEARY AND TINA ROMERO GRAB A SELFIE WITH A ZOMBIE (WARREN E. HULL); (BOTTOM) WEST AND ROMERO HAVE A MOMENT WHILE PRODUCER NATALIE METZGER LOOKS ON.

zombies for filming: thirty background zombies, ten principal zombies, four stunt zombies, and one highly stimulated FANGORIA correspondent. Add some movie magic, and that's enough bodies to fill an intimate Brooklyn nightclub. We talked through it all, but in moments of silence my eyes kept peeking over to a box of loose intestines in the corner labeled "zombie queen guts." I later overheard Christina ask producer Natalie Metzger, "How are the rats? Are they behaving themselves?"

I had some downtime while I waited for my time to shine, so the next step was to investigate. I wandered outside (mind you, still under latex in 90-degree heat) to

THE NEW ROMERO PROTAGONISTS:
NICO (TOMAS MATOS), BARRY (QUINCY DUNN-BAKER),
DRE (KATY O'BRIAN), AND SAM (JAQUEL SPIVEY).

THE SCREEN HAS
NEVER SEEN A ZOMBIE
HORDE QUITE LIKE THIS.

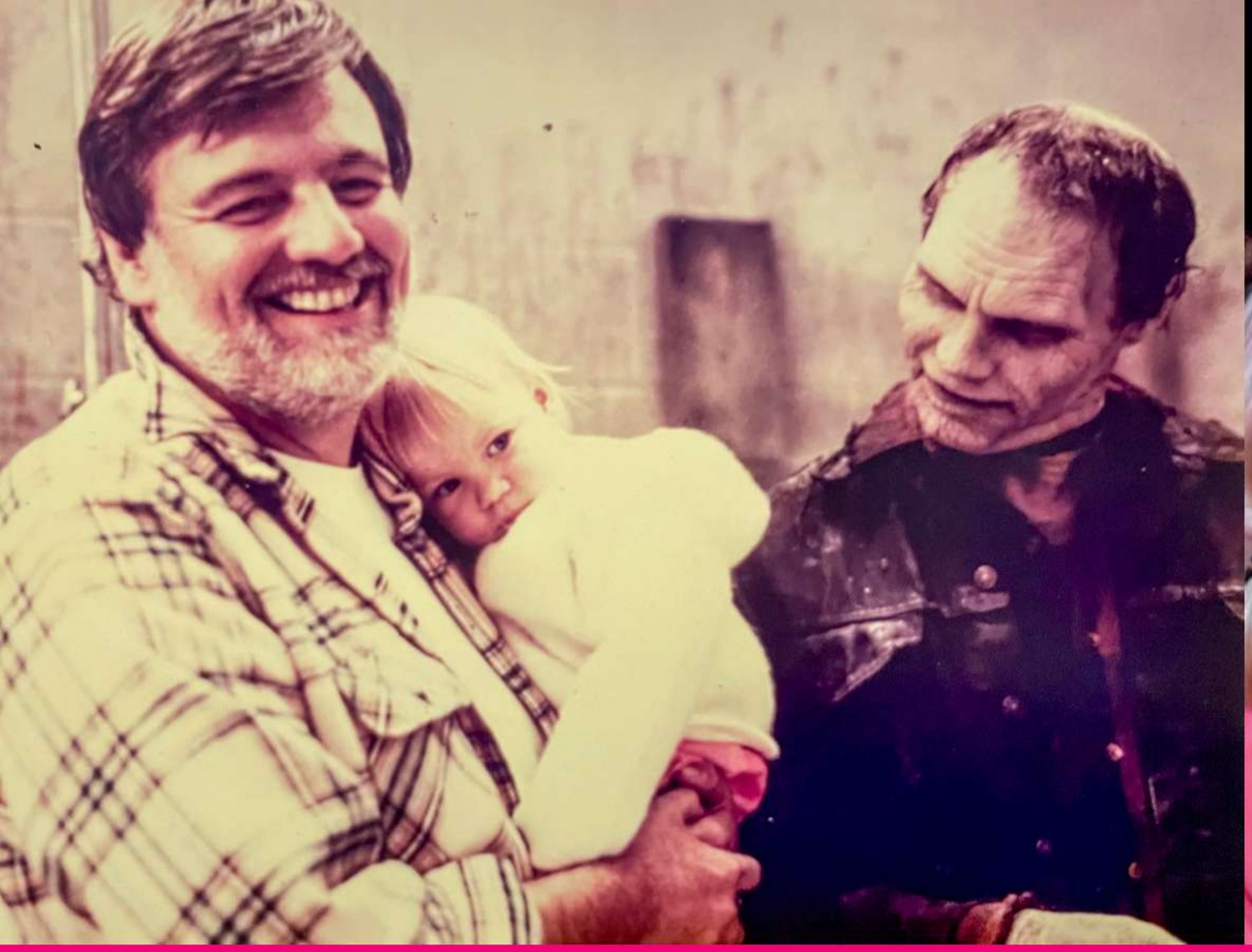
over script supervisor Kim Blacknall for a while. She was posted in the dark behind the club scene build, watching Dominique Jackson slay and destroy through the monitor. While maintaining the consistency of the project, she and the crew were silently jamming to Ke$ha. Even the last line of continuity defense had the freedom of (professionally) gettin' down.

Eventually, the zombie extras and I broke for lunch. The undead cafeteria, man... I might've cracked my makeup at the scene of a horde of zombies sitting down, enjoying some grilled chicken over a healthy green salad. I sat next to "Influencer Zombie" and "Roller Derby Zombie." With background artists, you'll often get a mixed bag of pros, but many of the undead club kids here turned out to be young, horror-loving queer people. Our

I BEG FANS TO RESPECT THE HORDE. IT REALLY IS HARDER THAN IT LOOKS.

a different section of the warehouse. What I found was Margaret Cho, Quincy Dunn-Baker and Katy O'Brian fighting off infected rats (crafted by Romero regular Tom Savini and his associate Jason Baker). I'm happy to report that the live rats were very much professionals with genuine set etiquette, same as Quincy, Katy and Margaret.

It's all business like you'd expect on set, but there was a hint of party mode to it all that I'm positive Tina had a hand in. She often referenced her father's priority to "keep it playful, even when exploring the dark sides of humanity." I kept wandering, and ended up hovering



A QUEEN'S JOURNEY: (LEFT) TINA ROMERO ON THE SET OF *DAY OF THE DEAD* WITH GEORGE A. ROMERO AND SHERMAN HOWARD IN 1984, AND (RIGHT) ON THE SET OF *QUEENS* WITH HER MOM, CHRISTINE FORREST, IN 2024.

PHOTO (LEFT) COURTESY OF TINA ROMERO / (RIGHT) BY PHIL NOBILE JR.

small talk turned into a larger group conversation on our feelings towards queer horror, and their excitement to be part of something they could potentially hip their kids to someday. In the same way we digest the social commentary of classic Romero zombie movies, current and future horror fans should clock the contemporary absurdity of politicizing drag performers through the use of radical camp comedy.

I shook some hands, listened to some stories, and then it was time to leave my brains behind the curtain for the final club scene. Dominique Jackson, Quincy Dunn-Baker and Jaquel Spivey were looking fierce on stage as I, with the horde of undead club kids, infested the faux-Bushwick venue. To my left was undead executive producer Liz Liguori. We cackled in between takes and rehearsed our hungry zombie sound effects. Grunting was highly encouraged. They wouldn't be heard in the final cut, obviously, but Tina knew the extra immersion could only help our performances. One rule was treated with the highest importance, which she repeated at least twice like the spirit of her dad was in the room: absolutely no fast movements, and *no running*. To my right was a super sparkly John-Michael Lyles, known in the moment as "Go Go Boy," who had a drunken stumble-zombie hobble that put my rookie limp to shame. I asked how long he'd practiced his strut (I had been practicing for months). Maybe that was a weird question, because he laughed and said, "Not long."

The thirty background zombies and I would start in the back. Tina would call action, and we'd limp to the front, spreading out slowly as we hobbled to the beat of the club. At a certain mark, the survivors on stage would attack the stunt zombies, tossing them back into the rest of the horde. When I could get a view of the playback in between takes, I swore there could've been a close call of a zombie elbow to my head. I was witnessing real filmmaking unfold right in front of my eyes, knowing that in the moment, the crew's highest priorities were safety and feel-good energy.

For how authentic this all felt, it's wild to learn how up to this point Tina was resistant to the idea of adapting her father's legacy. For years she'd sworn off a zombie movie unless there was a genuine way of attacking it. One day, she said, she understood that her "way in was through the world of going out. With legacy comes an opportunity and responsibility, and DJing NYC queer nightlife kept my lights on through film school. I met my closest chosen family there. It's a place of resilience and resistance. It's also a world where people are scrappy, and figure out how to make stuff work." The props she gives translates into the fictional story she made, but also the true story of the greater *Queens of the Dead* team putting it all together.

Queens of the Dead is more than a movie that needed to be made. Much like the life of a club kid and the story written by Tina and Erin Judge, *Queens of the Dead* relies on and celebrates the impact of a scene that, through it all, genuinely cares. When there's no more room in hell, the dead will walk the Earth, and I've seen zombies just like this in Bushwick. Take it as a warning that the dead, or any threat, will know struggle when threatening a community this solid. 💀

For decades, George A. Romero and Tom Savini defined the LIVING DEAD

Now
A NEW GENERATION
MAKES ITS MARK...

QUEENS OF FX

For her debut feature, Tina Romero assembled a dedicated NY makeup FX team, led by Christina Grant (*Search Party*, *Severance*), to reimagine the living dead for a queer club scene. Fango talks to Christina about turning our cover ghoul/contributor into one of the undead, and how she and her team created a glamorous, glittery and gory zombie horde for a new generation of horror fans.

BY PHIL NOBILE JR.

Tell us about making up our cover ghoul, Fango contributor Xero Gravity.

Xero was the best! She got a true taste of indie filmmaking coming in and playing with us the day that she did. For her makeup I initially had a piece made that was in the same vein as 'Z Queen' (the first drag artist zombified in the film): exaggerated drag. But then we changed our mind; Xero has such a unique look that I wanted it to still feel like her – just the glam zombie version of her. She fit right in with our Bushwick apocalypse!

THE *QUEENS* TEAM (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP): MITCHELL BECK, INGRID OKOLA, CHRISTINA GRANT AND LINDSAY GELFAND GLAM UP THE UNDEAD XERO GRAVITY.

There's an air of legacy to the film; it's very much its own thing, but the film is not shy about its DNA, so to speak (the gag of Savini declaring onscreen that 'This is not a George Romero movie,' some of Blitz//Berlin's music cues, etc.). Did that manifest at all in the makeup department?

Yes, we wanted to echo the look of the original *Dawn of the Dead* makeups, calling back to the green/grey skin tone that Savini and team used, and add our own spin to it. Tina told us that those original decisions were also budgetary decisions – and as we also had a very low budget, it seemed apropos to stay within the world of 'this is what a Romero zombie looks like.'

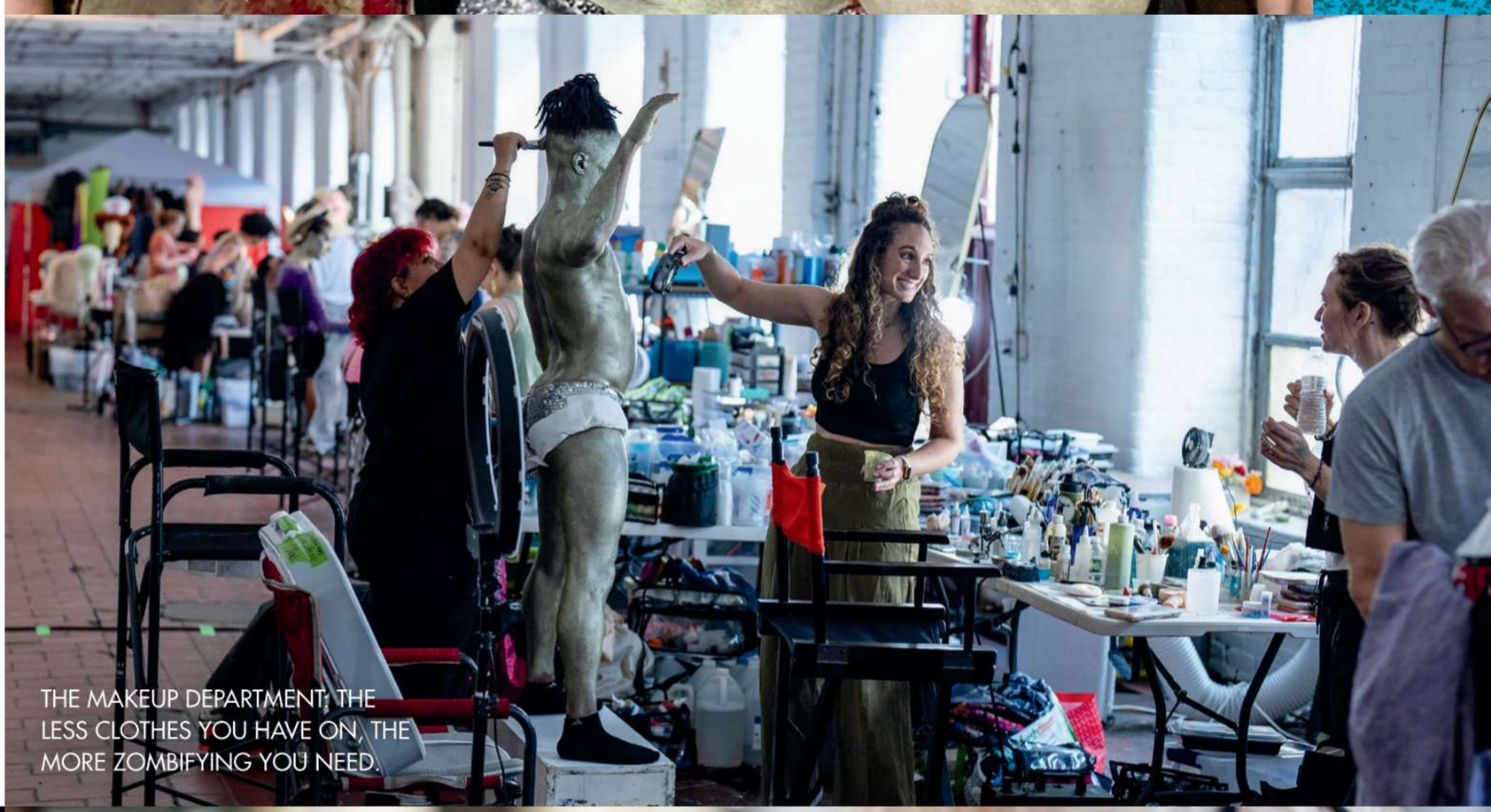
We also added a George Romero 'Easter egg' on one of our zombies, for the eagle-eyed hardcore Romero fans to find.

Talk to me about working with Tina Romero to develop the look of the zombies.

When Tina and I first met, she mentioned 'glitter blood' and I was sold immediately. Our zombies needed to reflect the world they existed in, which in our case is the queer Bushwick nightlife and drag scene. The original look book that Tina had created had the most amazing research pics — tons of color, shimmer, shine. We knew that we were going to need to be able to 'go there' in terms of makeup.

I happened upon the Kryolan Silver Green Aquacolor, which was not only the perfect color but had an amazing silvery sheen. The sheen effect really brings out the contours of the body… our zombies looked really sexy! We added another layer of glitter spray over the whole look and when these zombies catch the light they are really quite beautiful.

GO GO BOY (JOHN-MICHAEL LYLES) IS FLANKED BY MAKEUP FX ARTISTS LINDSAY GELFAND, CHRISTINA GRANT, LISA FORST AND STELLA SENSEL.



THE MAKEUP DEPARTMENT: THE LESS CLOTHES YOU HAVE ON, THE MORE ZOMBIFYING YOU NEED.

WARREN E. HULL IS TOUCHED UP ON SET.

EXEC PRODUCER LIZ LIGUORI PULLS DOUBLE DUTY AS A ZOMBIE, WITH SOME HELP FROM TODD KLEITSCH.

ALISON EVANS, MITCHELL BECK, AND MONIQUE GAFFNEY TEND TO UNDEAD MOM "SUMMER" (MANDY SIMPSON).

SET PHOTOS BY SPENCER PAZER / PORTRAITS BY LIZ LIGUORI

Josh Turi from Designs to Deceive worked up a lot of different versions of glitter blood for us with mixes of edible shimmer and conventional glitter. We would add more glitter and rhinestones to really make the blood pop under the light. The trend in modern film and TV is to barely light anything — it was refreshing to actually be able to see the makeup and blood on *Queens*.

How did you 'zig' where others 'zagged' on the zombie front?

Tina did not want what I consider a 'stereotypical' zombie — rotting flesh, decrepit, gory. She still wanted to see their humanity. We do have some elements of gore, but our gore is pretty. Our blood sparkles. When someone thinks of a 'zombie' they think of protruding cheekbones and brow bones with sunken skin. For 'Z Queen' I wanted to take that in a glam direction — really high cheekbones and uplifted brows, essentially accentuating the drag and not the dead. We added a few foam or Pros-Aide transfer bites or wounds, with appropriate glitter blood, but it is all pretty stylized. Not a bloody free-for-all.

It was important to me that these zombies WEAR makeup as humans and how that transitions after they turn. How does their human look inform their zombie look. A zombie who is wearing lipstick will transfer that lipstick to a bite wound – much like when you transfer lipstick to a glass after taking a sip of water. So there were a lot of makeup moments like that that I think set our zombies apart from the standard zombie.

Talk to me about your makeup department's workflow.

We had a very limited budget so we had to be very strategic about what we could have custom made. We knew we wanted Z Queen to be a *Queens of the Dead*-specific piece. We had scripted kills and injuries that we would need the prosthetic pieces for. Josh lifecast the actors and created those pieces for us out of silicone and custom Pros-Aide transfers.

My department was comprised of two sides – the glam/beauty side, Erin Acker (*Call Jane*, *Our Home Out West*) and Michael Clifton (*Girls5eva*, *The Other Two*) and the FX/gore/zombie side, Lindsay Gelfand (*Fallout*, *Caught Stealing*), Ingrid Okola (*V/H/S/HALLOWEEN*, *Model Hunger*), and Stella Sensel (*The Penguin*, *The Bride!*). Though at certain points all of us had to paint zombies. We applied a mix of Kryolan Aquacolor and Ben Nye liquiset with brushes then contoured with shimmery eyeshadows from Mehron, Ben Nye, Lit Cosmetics, Lemonhead, and Urban Decay for our zombies.

Certainly Tina's dad was not afraid to give a zombie a personality; how did you and your team approach that challenge?

It started with who they were before they turned. We would zero in on what elements define that character and then twist it in some way. You know, maybe now their eyeshadow and mascara is running… maybe their false lashes and nails have fallen off or the lipstick is smeared.

The film is heavy on character makeups and lighter than one might expect on gore (though not without a gross-out moment or two). What were those conversations like in determining what the movie would show or not show? What's your take on FX gags in general?

A lot of that was determined by budget. We had certain kills or injuries that had to be included as plot points… but we also had conversations about how to get the same impact without

KOLTON KRAUSE PARTIED TILL SHE DROPPED. THEN KEPT PARTYING.

showing every single bloody thing, because we just didn't have the money or the manpower to do it all. Our movie is also just not a gore fest… it's campy and character-driven.

There was a mention on set about this being the first women-led (all women?) makeup FX team on a zombie movie. What's meaningful about that to you? Our readers might not realize that's rare.

My full-time FX staff who applied prosthetics was all-female, which is pretty rare (Josh rounded out the dept by building the pieces). Lindsay, Stella, and Ingrid are some of the best FX artists I know, and I needed people who understood that we were marrying glam and gore and that we didn't want either aspect to outweigh the other.

There's something to be said for different viewpoints; maybe we will see a character or a makeup that we haven't seen before because the people creating the look normally DON'T get this chance to work in this way or with these people. There's also a lot of pressure to not fuck up; the fact that it is a queer story, with queer characters, a female makeup FX dept, a female director. There's a lot that will rankle the mainstream horror crowd. And maybe this just isn't the film for them. But they sure would miss out on a fun time.

I heard that Tina's 'uncles' helped out by shipping some body parts and such.

Due to our small budget, Greg Nicotero gifted us some foam pieces that we used on our zombie horde. We chose the pieces that fit the aesthetic we were going for. Without that connection we would not have had the money to 'zombify' all of our zombies and still have the resources to outfit the rest of the drag characters in the film.

This is a guess but I'm not sure there's ever been a zombie movie where the makeup FX team worked so closely with the hair dept.

Mitchell Beck and I both worked off the visual look book that Tina had made so it was pretty straight-forward what we both needed to achieve. Mitch and Monique Gaffney were a department of two people and what they were able to crank out was nothing short of a miracle. Along with costume designer David Tabbart, we really had to create complete characters.

Talk to me about seeing your work in the finished film.

It's always nerve-wracking to see your work after the fact because when you are making the thing you are just IN it. You gotta keep going and sometimes you might not have the time, resources, or manpower to make it 100% what you want. Tina was a true collaborator though. I asked to see certain shots while she was editing and we talked about some final VFX looks, so I felt like anything that I was concerned about was listened to and taken into consideration. I've never had that level of input before, and it was refreshing. I was quite pleased when we got to see the Tribeca premiere and I felt like all of my artists truly got to shine. I could exhale a bit. 💀

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity."

THE UNDEAD JAX (SAMORA LA PERDIDA) WITH OKOLA, GRANT AND GELFAND.

KIMBALL FARLEY AND SARAH COFFEY: INFLUENCERS AT THE END OF THE WORLD.

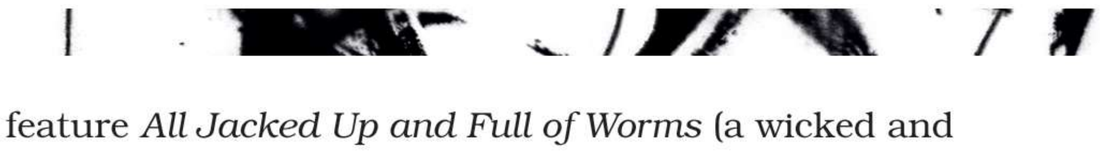
LIAM (HAL BAUM) ENGAGES IN ROLE PLAY WITH CLIENT RACHEL (GINGER LYNN ALLEN).

BY BRANDON STREUSSNIG

ACTS OF TRANSGRESSION: ALEX PHILLIPS ON *ANYTHING THAT MOVES*

THE FILMMAKER BEHIND *ALL JACKED UP AND FULL OF WORMS* UNCLOAKS HIS LATEST.

Cinematic transgression is a lost art. Sure, we'll get the perfunctory marketing-speak about the body horror event of the month or lip service about paying homage to the cinematic outcasts of yesteryear, but more often than not, there's always something missing. In an industry of commodification, where edges are sanded away into rounded respectability, true transgression is often said, not felt. For filmmaker Alex Phillips, whose latest film, *Anything That Moves*, is a sweaty, grimy breath of fresh air, it all comes from within. "I'm coming at storytelling from the ground up, from what's in the body. I think it's all about eliciting emotion from your audience," he says. "The other end of that spectrum is all aesthetic, more top-down and conceptual."



Between his first feature *All Jacked Up and Full of Worms* (a wicked and disgusting addiction parable from 2022) and *Anything That Moves*, you get the sense that Phillips isn't interested in shock for shock's sake. From frame one of *Anything That Moves* – a grainy, 16mm slasher picture centered around a string of murders of a male sex worker's clients – we're in uncharted territory among lush, green forestry surrounding closeups of a woman riding a man's face to climax. Female pleasure is rare enough onscreen. That it *starts* the film? Practically revolutionary. That man, sex worker Liam (Hal Baum), is another abnormality. Genderswapping the, forgive the term, "Hooker With a Heart of Gold" trope, *Anything That Moves*' lead is a lovely, almost adorable guy who approaches every act of sex with generosity and openness. Bald, wearing a toupee ("He's wearing a mask, which is the wig, and that's his flaw or what makes him even more beautiful in a way," says Phillips) and a tight, red cycling outfit, Liam is far afield from your typical lothario.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALEX PHILLIPS

Baum's Liam is the key to making the transgression in *Anything That Moves* stick to the ribs. The film lulls you into thinking its taboo is sex, as it's shot and structured like a porno. "I wanted to capture that aesthetic where a lot of the structure is visiting Johns and Janes and having sex with them," Phillips explains. In a sexless age of cinema, you'd be forgiven for assuming that full frontal nudity, men pissing on other men, food play, and a whole host of other kinks would be the shock value. It's so refreshing, then, that it's not.

A standout scene wherein Liam engages in cuckoldry to help a husband pleasure his wife is played with sincerity. Liam's here to help spark a reconnection, and as such, we don't snicker or laugh. Instead, we empathize with a couple who love one another. The film is funny, sure, but it's never at the expense of pleasure, with Phillips saying, "I think the humor comes through excess and joy, as opposed to making fun of somebody." Liam is a surrogate through whom we can meet sexuality where it is. "He's just walking into rooms and with this total openness," continues Phillips, "his eyes wide open, his heart open, and then processing what's in front of him and being able to deliver." Even Liam's relationship with his girlfriend (an excellent Jiana Nicole) is full of passionate love. Many might bristle at the mere mention of polygamy, and yet, these two can't get enough of one another.

SEX WORKER LIAM NEEDS THIS KIND OF TROUBLE LIKE HE NEEDS A... WELL, YOU KNOW.

Perceived transgression and audacity being met with arms-wide-open acceptance allows us to remember that pleasure, however you find it (within ethical reason), is as human as eating or breathing.

That's why when Phillips begins layering in the murder, it's so jarring. We aren't the only ones following Liam throughout his day of meeting tricks. A shadowy figure stalks him, brutally slaughtering the women and men. It's not as if Phillips doesn't trickle in warnings, saying, "I wanted there to be classic narrative conflicts in all of these interactions. So, it's never just *pure* pleasure. It's never really about getting off. It's like there's always something built in that's pushing us forward, or Liam's trying to discover something." Liam might not push back on these sexual experiences, and the acts themselves may be sensual, but his interpersonal relationship with many of the soon-to-be murdered clients is fractured. It's a brilliant way to not only force you to engage with violence as evil, not sex, but also to have you playing "guess the suspect" as you go.

"I LOVE BLOWN-OUT HIGHLIGHTS ON FILM. I LOVE THE COLOR DEPTH, I LOVE THE DISTRESS. I LIKE IT WHEN YOU CAN SEE THE DAMAGE ON THE FILM. I LIKE THAT IT COMES NATURALLY."
- ALEX PHILLIPS-

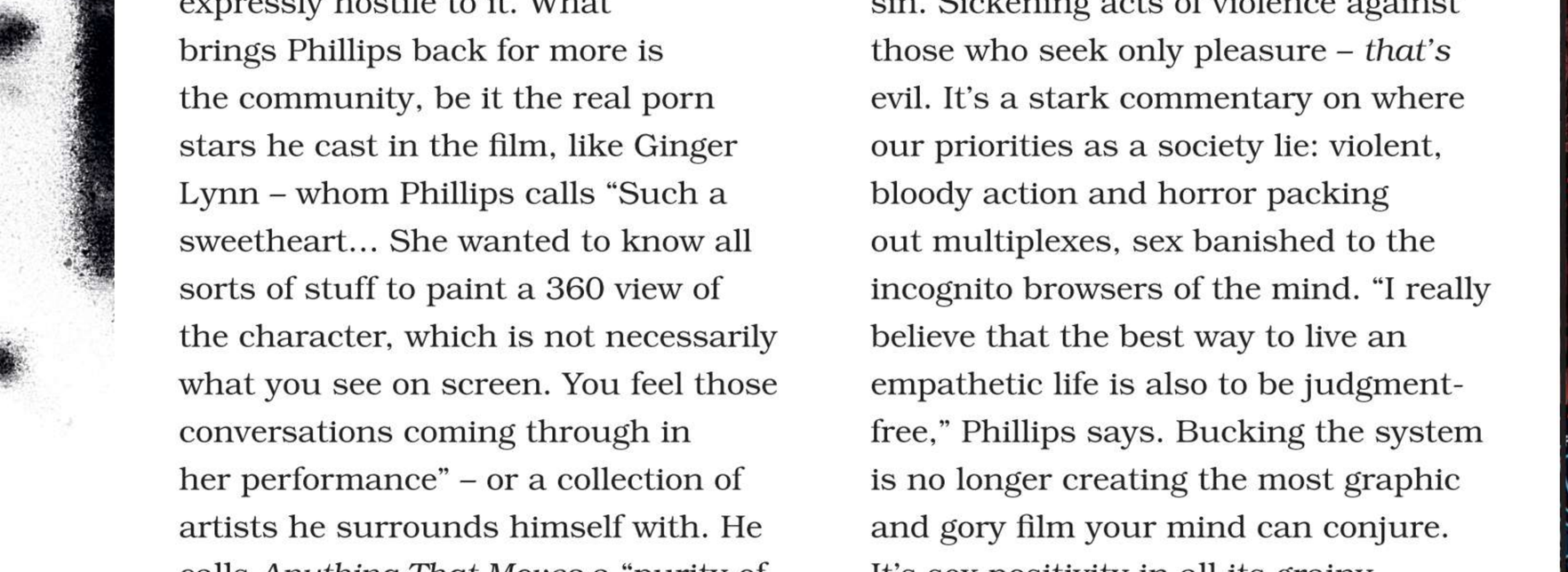
The jagged images, captured on 16mm, lend themselves to something you'd find on 42nd Street in 1977. As with thematics, this isn't pastiche. Phillips didn't just attempt to capture porno/exploitation signifiers. He went ahead and made his own. "I love blown-out highlights on film. I love the color depth, I love the distress. I like it when you can see the damage on the film. I like that it comes naturally," he says, continuing, "In the beach scene, the top

BLACK GLOVES DO NOT A GIALLO MAKE, BUT *ANYTHING THAT MOVES* DOES THE WORK.

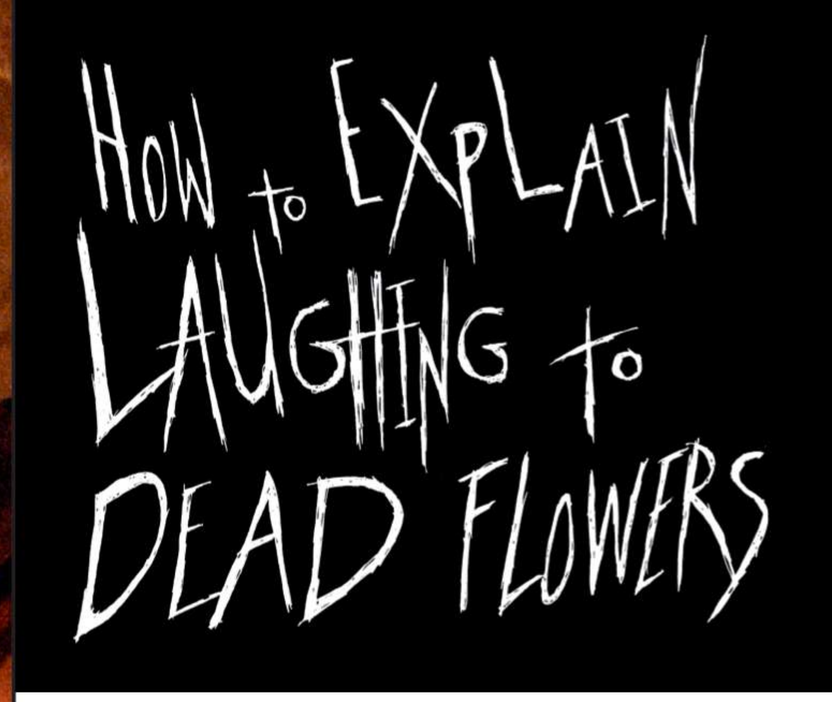
layer of the film got scratched. So, then there are these blue streaks coming through, and I think it just looked beautiful. Obviously, not something you ask for, it's just what happens when you're shooting on something physical." These imperfections, found through genuine mishaps, not manufacturing, create dissonant beauty around Liam's lovely face and all the sex he's having. It makes the bloody, violent death surrounding him all the more heartbreaking. You feel as if you're viewing a lost home video found in the dusty corner of an attic.

It's so difficult to create true, independent art in an environment expressly hostile to it. What brings Phillips back for more is the community, be it the real porn stars he cast in the film, like Ginger Lynn – whom Phillips calls "Such a sweetheart… She wanted to know all sorts of stuff to paint a 360 view of the character, which is not necessarily what you see on screen. You feel those conversations coming through in her performance" – or a collection of artists he surrounds himself with. He calls *Anything That Moves* a "purity of vision," and perhaps that's the truest transgression of all. Where industry and capital seek to mine IP and remove the identity of filmmakers, the real iconoclasts and freaks are the ones we'll remember. *Anything That Moves* is an Alex Phillips picture through and through. His cinema is a way for him to use metaphor to paint a picture that feels true to himself, saying, "I have potent memories or lived experiences or just emotional events that happen to me that I can't really work out with a therapist or somebody."

One might be startled by the excessive nudity and wild acts of pleasure, but *Anything That Moves* is a reminder that getting off isn't a sin. Sickening acts of violence against those who seek only pleasure – *that's* evil. It's a stark commentary on where our priorities as a society lie: violent, bloody action and horror packing out multiplexes, sex banished to the incognito browsers of the mind. "I really believe that the best way to live an empathetic life is also to be judgment-free," Phillips says. Bucking the system is no longer creating the most graphic and gory film your mind can conjure. It's sex positivity in all its grainy, sloppy glory.



WE KNOW SEX WORK CAN BE ABOUT EXTREME PHYSICAL INTIMACY, BUT THIS IS RIDICULOUS.



MISSED AN ISSUE???
CHECK OUT OUR ONLINE SHOP FOR BACK ISSUES
I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER
FANGORIA
28 YEARS LATER
THE FX OF THE RAGE VIRUS
SINNERS

BY RICHARD NEWBY

SOMETHING THAT CAN'T BE KILLED: DAN TRACHTENBERG TAKES US INTO THE BADLANDS

THE WRITER/DIRECTOR RETURNS TO THE PREDATOR UNIVERSE.

The hunt is back on! But this time the prey is different, and so is the Predator. FANGORIA chats with Dan Trachtenberg about *Predator: Badlands*, Yautja culture, how it's actually a slasher franchise, and the deal with that trophy collection.

Where did the desire to tell the story of a young Yautja come from?

I seem to be continually interested in underdog stories, in any way they come. I thought it would be interesting to take this classic movie monster and get people to connect with him and feel for him. I wanted people to root for the Predator; at the same time, though, I didn't want to completely humanize it. There's something for me about the pull of a hitman movie or a mob movie where you have these anti-heroes and bad guys, but they have a code and honor it in their own way.

I love movies about characters breaking cycles, generationally too. *Killer of Killers* had a ton of that in it. And so, it was really a combination of concepts like breaking a cycle and the underdog story that was my personal way into *Badlands*.

***Predator: Killer of Killers* was awesome. I'm curious if working in animation influenced your direction of live-action or vice versa? What, if anything, did you bring from one medium to the other?**

I think my work in live action probably had more influence on how I tackled animation. In animation, I tried to retain live action sensibilities. When you can put the camera anywhere, or build any set, or do anything that you're able to create in the finite amount of time, it sometimes encourages you to do things visually in animation that you're unable to do physically in live action. That's wonderful, and I certainly wanted to embrace the medium as much as I could. But other times it felt like if we were going to make this feel more like a movie that I would make, we needed to adhere to whatever my sensibilities have been as I've developed them over the years of making traditional movies and TV shows. So, I hope that made *Killer of Killers* feel like a bigger cinematic experience, beyond just an animated one.

You worked with a linguist for *Killer of Killers* and *Badlands* to develop the Yautja language. Can you tell me about what went into that process?

Yeah, Britton Watkins is the guy we worked with. He's the protégé of the guy who Cameron works with on *Avatar*. It's been a multi-year journey, developing the language and incorporating it into both *Killer of Killers* and *Badlands*. To be honest, I can say almost nothing about it other than witnessing how complicated it is [*laughs*].

When we make changes to the language it impacts visual effects and multiple tiers, and it's very expensive. But I do think trying to have some sort of veracity in the way the Yautja speak will elevate the entire movie so that it can feel like a lived in and breathed in world and culture in the same way that we experienced in *Avatar*, but also Dothraki in *Game of Thrones*, Elvish in *Lord of the Rings*, and Klingon in *Star Trek*. So that was really the impulse.

Britton created not just a dictionary, but grammar, sentence structure, and written language as well. The written language all comes from the runes we've seen starting from the original movie that were just there to be aesthetically interesting. And the verbal language comes from taking into consideration the Yautja's mouth structure, and back of the throat noises and mandible clicks that we've heard from the franchise before.

Tell me about the design of *Badlands'* central Predator, Dek. You've introduced some really unique looking Yautja between *Prey*, *Killer of Killers*, and this. Dek looks younger and leaner than the other members of the species we've seen.

Since embarking on this journey, two things I've been really interested in are treating the Yautja like a species with different cultures, not a creature that pops up and then it's just cloned or multiplied. I don't believe they'd all look the same. On Earth we see a lot

PHOTOS COURTESY OF 20TH CENTURY STUDIOS

DEK (DIMITRIUS SCHUSTER-KOLOMATANGI) AND THIA (ELLE FANNING) BECOME UNLIKELY ALLIES.

> “I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO TAKE THIS CLASSIC MOVIE MONSTER AND GET PEOPLE TO CONNECT WITH HIM AND FEEL FOR HIM. I WANTED PEOPLE TO ROOT FOR THE PREDATOR.” - DAN TRACHTENBERG

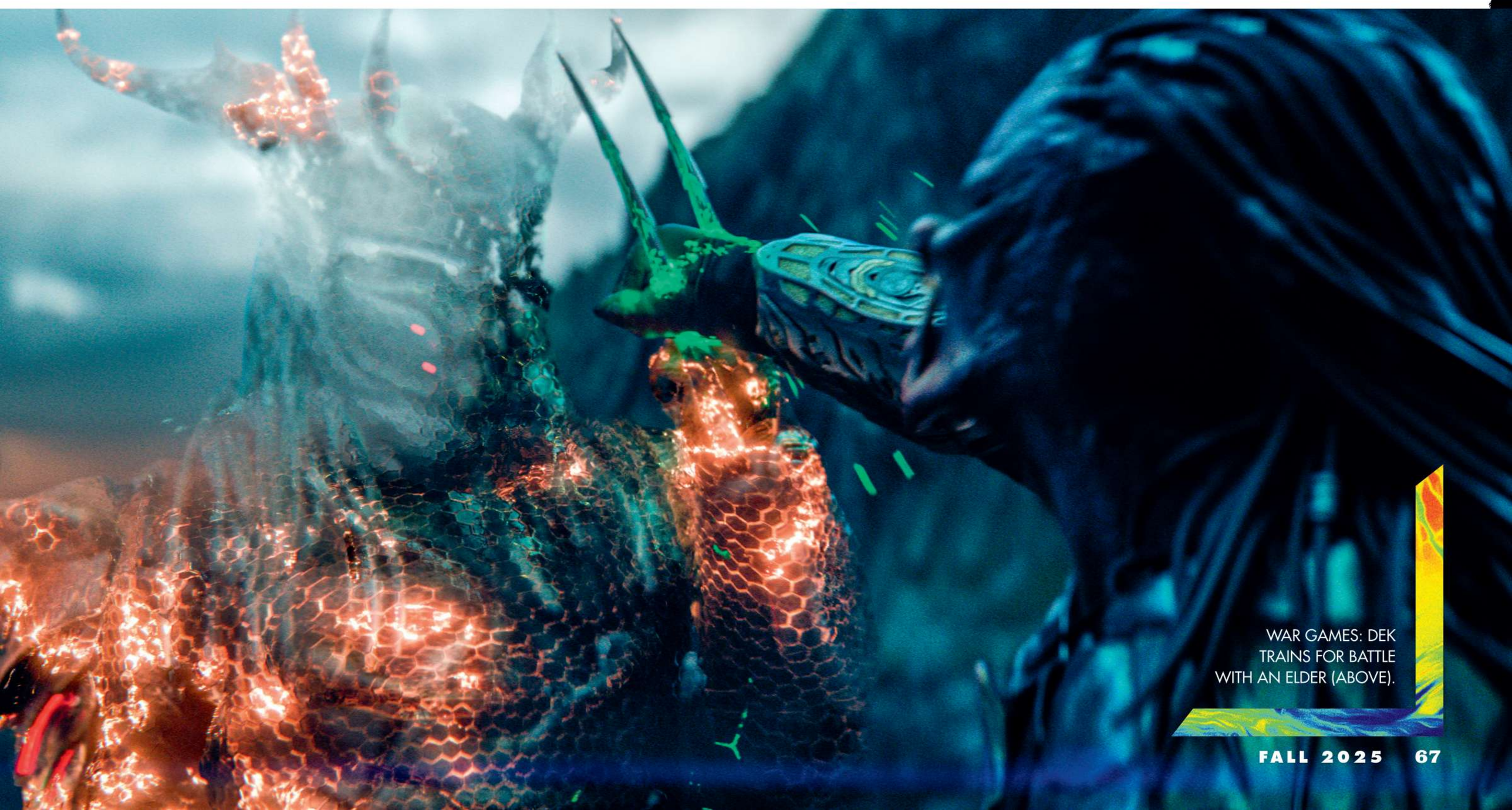
of different looking humans, and animals within the same species. I feel like if the Yautja were to exist for real on a planet of their own, they would all look a little different.

Also, I wanted to deliver on what the first movie did, which was very surprising. I remember finally seeing *Predator*, after years of being prevented from seeing it because it was R-rated, and seeing it decloak and seeing the mask and thinking, ‘Oh! Is that the Predator?’ And then the mask comes off and so you see ‘Oh no! *That’s* the Predator.’ And since then, every iteration of it has been like a Xerox of that original design, and sometimes a lesser thing because of that. I felt, aside from going back to the original Predator, which I do think is in store for us at some point, there’s something to delivering that ‘Oh!’ surprise where the Yautja looks a little different, to create a thrill or something a little scary.

In the case of Dek, he feels smaller and weaker than the others. That’s the big narrative decision in the movie. He’s the runt of the litter, yet he’s got ambition. All of the design choices felt like a way to make him less than the other Predators but still rootable.

I know you’re a big video game guy. Did any *Predator* media, outside of the movies, play into your direction on *Badlands*?

In a few ways. One by just osmosis of absorbing them over the years. It’s funny because, thinking back, they made an impact on *Prey* as well. We were playing *Hunting Grounds*,



WAR GAMES: DEK TRAINS FOR BATTLE WITH AN ELDER (ABOVE).

NEW PREDATOR, NEW WEAPONS: WHO WOULDN'T WANT THIS FOR CHRISTMAS?

the latest *Predator* game, and the way that the Predator traverses through trees, which is also there in *Concrete Jungle*, was a big influence. The falling leaves, the Predators leaping from tree to tree, insinuating its movement as something beyond human beings, but not too creature-like, was something we looked at. *Hunting Grounds* did this wonderful thing in which the Predator uses its gauntlet to slide down trees, which was vicious and badass and still made sense in terms of what its abilities are. And there was also the wealth of designs we've seen over the years on comic book covers, in the books themselves, and across the games, that certainly led to the plethora of designs that we see in *Badlands*.

One of the cool things that I know a lot of folks are excited about is Dek teaming up with the Weyland-Yutani synthetic, Thia. What drew you to envision Elle Fanning in the role? Especially since she's the only human-looking character we might see in the film.

The thing that I love about Thia, and the fun of her in this movie, is that where other synths are very dry, or like C-3PO who's a real Negative Nancy, she's the exact opposite of both of those things. She is unflappable. Nothing can break her stride. She's always looking at the positive outcome. She's the opposite of what the Predator is, but he's stuck with her which is a really fun dynamic in the movie. And Elle has a lot of that spirit, not just in the role but in life.

With Weyland-Yutani being a presence in this film, and this being the first Predator film set in the future, were there any conversations about where in the future *Badlands* needed to be set? Are we looking at around the time Fede Álvarez's *Alien: Romulus* is set, or further off in Weyland-Yutani's development?

We've only spoken about it in as much as wanting to be beyond what we've seen so far in terms of the *Predator* franchise and not be hampered by anything else going on with Weyland-Yutani. We were writing

PREDATOR: BADLANDS JUST MIGHT BE THE BUDDY ACTION MOVIE THE WORLD NEEDS.

or prepping *Badlands* when Fede was still shooting, or maybe in post. But things change and we didn't know what was going to happen in *Romulus*, or in the *Alien: Earth* show, or anything else that might follow.

So really, with the stuff we're establishing in *Killer of Killers*, we just wanted to make sure that we were in the far, far future or past, so all the stuff that other people have made, or want to make, can happen. And frankly, it's also been fun for me, working on both *Prey* and *Killer of Killers*, to dance with things the Yautja are adorned with that are futuristic but also feel like things that existed before the other weapons we've seen timeline-wise. And now with *Badlands*, I get to be in that future space. That's why we put the laser bow in *Badlands*, because it's very futuristic. Laser weaponry was something I was avoiding when I was going to the past. Even though we had magnetic technology, or the feral Predator shooting a bolt, there was a physicality to things in terms of the time period. So now I'm allowed to embrace a little more futuristic weaponry.

One of the things that caught a lot of people's attention in the trailer for *Badlands* was the trophy collection on the Predator ship. Going back to *Predator 2*, the trophy collection in that film spawned so many things including the comics and the whole *AvP* concept. In your film we don't just see a Xenomorph skull, but also what appears to be a skull of an alien from *Independence Day*, a T. rex skull, and a gorilla skull, among others. Are these just fun Easter eggs for you or have you actually given thought to concepts like Predators vs Dinosaurs, or Predators of the Planet of the Apes?

All of them. Any of them. I mean I'm here because of an Easter egg in *Predator 2*. And any fun Easter egg can one day become a canonical event in the future. So, all things on that wall are possible.

You released an extended ending for *Killer of Killers* that saw Dutch and Mike Harrigan in statis alongside *Prey*'s Naru. Could other characters like *Predators*' Royce or *The Predator*'s Quinn McKenna factor into your plans as well?

All things are possible. Also I've read some commentary of people receiving that extended ending to *Killer of Killers* like, 'It's a bummer those characters went through their journey and the Predators deemed them honor-bound but now they're capturing them and being a-holes.' My take on it, and what I wanted to express was, they are a-holes [*laughs*]. They're very overpowered when they go on their hunts. And yet they still act with honor, in their minds, and this capture of the honor-bound, and allowing them to compete in their gladiatorial arena is a very honorable thing. And what the [extended ending] means is that there's still more story to tell with those characters.

You've spoken before about a sequel to *Prey* – is that a story you're planning to tell in live-action or in animation? And now that you've directed in both mediums, how do you decide which is best for the story you want to tell?

It's all very new for me now, right? I figured out the animation side of things solely for the stories in *Killer of Killers*. And now that we've done that, I get to think more on what else gets to be animated. But all of my conceptions of *Prey 2* have always been thought of as live action.

It's been almost 40 years since the release of *Predator* and fans are just as excited about the franchise, if not more so after the release of *Prey*. What do you attribute to the reason behind the continued appeal?

On one hand it's certainly the design of the creature. And not just aesthetically. But also, when we saw that original movie, every other slasher movie at the time – which I do think is the genre *Predator* becomes – was concerned with a supernatural entity and a pure malevolent force. The Predator was so scary because of what it represented, because of how smart it was and all of these elements in it that spoke to a culture and species of intelligent, cunning beings that were still obviously quite ferocious. There were other copycats that did not have the staying power because it was just another alien or malevolent force. The Predator has a code, something we didn't see with Jason and Michael, or even the Xenomorph until *Alien 3*. But a Predator looks at its prey and decides whether to kill it or not; they analyze and try to arrange what they see as a fair fight. That has fueled the continued interest in the Predator.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

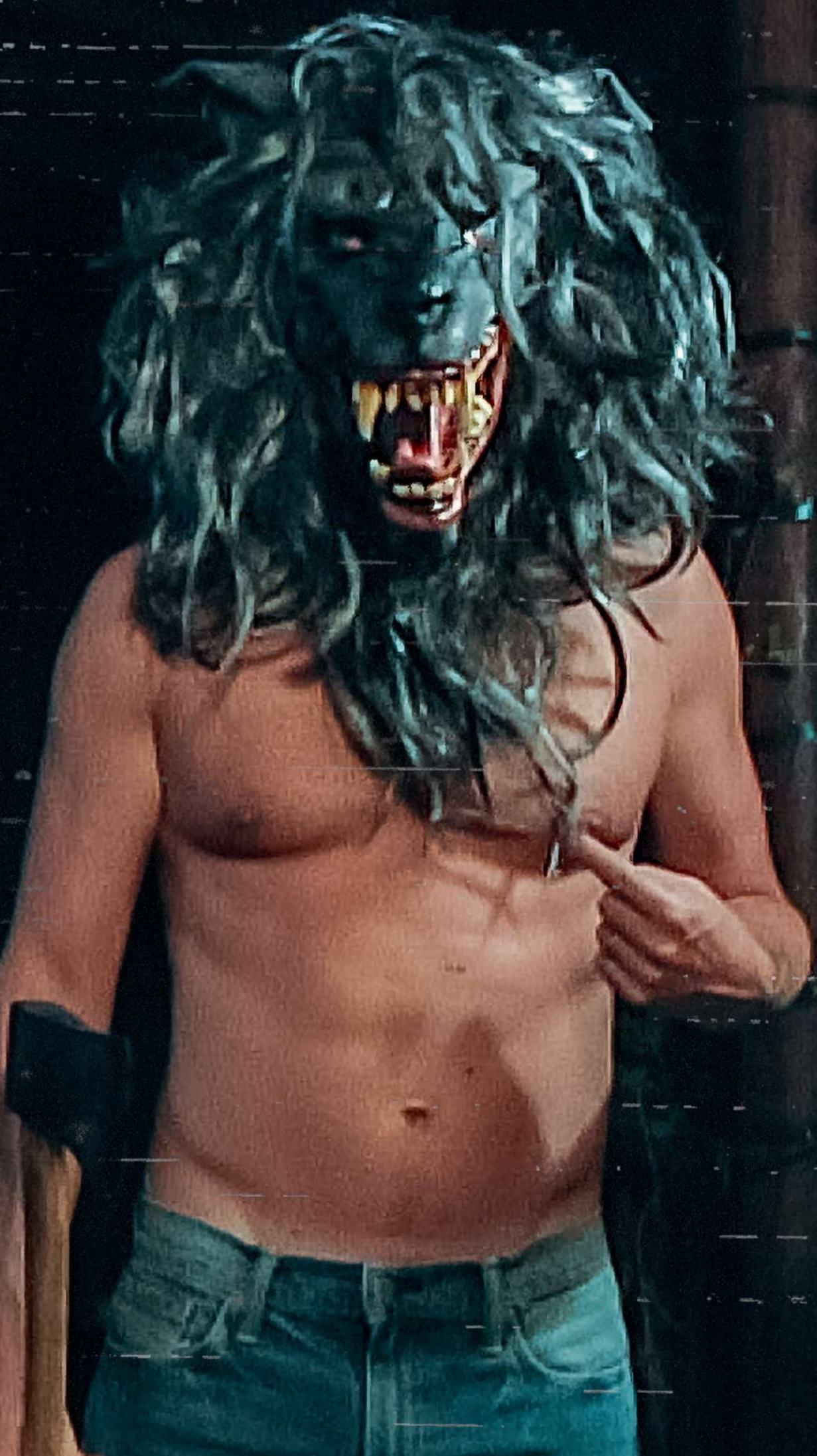
PHOTO BY NICOLA DOVE, COURTESY OF 20TH CENTURY STUDIOS

DAN TRACHTENBERG ANSWERS THE AGE-OLD QUESTION, "HOW DO YOU DIRECT A PREDATOR?" ANSWER: POLITELY. AND FROM A DISTANCE.

BY KIMBERLY LESZAK

THE CREEP TAPES KEEP ROLLING

AHEAD OF A SECOND SEASON, CO-CREATOR AND STAR MARK DUPLASS PONDERS THE PERILS OF PEACHFUZZ.



If you're dreaming of making home-movie style film projects with your best friends in remote locations, handing over some convincingly questionable raw footage to a streaming company, and being embraced by the horror masses for your innovation in a subgenre in desperate need of a renaissance, the *Creep* universe proves that dream is possible. It happened to Mark Duplass and Patrick Brice when they created their Netflix original found footage film *Creep* in 2014.

SCENES FROM A MURDERER: PEACHFUZZ AND JOSEF (MARK DUPLASS) KEEP ON KILLIN'.

Duplass, best known for his acting outside the horror genre in shows like *The League* and films like *Safety Not Guaranteed* and *The One I Love*, plays the *Creep* franchise's iconic wolf-masked killer (who goes by a new name in each installment, but since Duplass calls him Josef, we'll follow his lead). Duplass sat down with FANGORIA to discuss transitioning from indie film mainstay to indie horror icon, and while he's not sure about his newfound sobriquet, the mystery of the genre and the lifestyle that comes with it continue to intrigue him.

"I think I was intellectually familiar with it, but I wasn't energetically familiar with it, if that makes sense. I understood it, but I hadn't truly been around it, and I hadn't felt the warm embrace of it before," he says. "And when people see something they like, they just want to support it and see more of it, and that's pretty rare."

With two films and a first season of a series out last year and a second season coming to Shudder this November, audiences might naturally assume they are closer to knowing what makes Duplass' creation tick. But the beauty of Peachfuzz — Josef's bashful, mischievous, murderous alter ego — is the closer we get, the greater the mystery becomes.

"I DON'T SAY THIS LIGHTLY AND I WANT TO BE CAREFUL IN THE WAY THAT I SAY IT, BUT THERE IS A LOT OF ME IN THIS CHARACTER."

- MARK DUPLASS -

"To me, sometimes the over-talking and the explanation of the art can mean the death or the anathema of art. And *Creep* is the perfect example of, 'I don't know why I'm going to sing this song about someone named Peachfuzz, but I believe it's important and I'm just going to do it.' And when you trust those instincts, at least in this case, they bring us good things."

When Brice and Duplass set out to film a project in 2014, Duplass says they not only had no idea they were making a horror film, they didn't even think they knew how.

"When we were making the first film, what made it different from other horror IPs is we didn't think we were making a horror film at first. It sounds like a joke, but it's actually true. We were aiming for something that was deeply uncomfortable, and quiet, and slow, and that made audiences sit in that discomfort. But it wasn't until we started shooting it that we realized how uncomfortable it was, and that there was quite a bit of dread for audience members. And at that point, when we showed a rough cut to audiences, we did some reshooting and we leaned into that element. It sort of revealed itself to us."

The magic of *Creep*, in every iteration, is its surprising authenticity. There is no other character in horror quite like Josef, yet he often feels relatable, sometimes more than his victims. The various personality traits and backstories of each new character influence how Josef/Peachfuzz carries himself to a tune that is both sweetly playful and cunningly psychological.

"Every episode is different, and the episodes are different from the movies. And the person I'm interacting with also changes how much we improvise versus script; some people like a little more structure, and some people like

PHOTOS COURTESY OF AMC NETWORKS AND SHUDDER

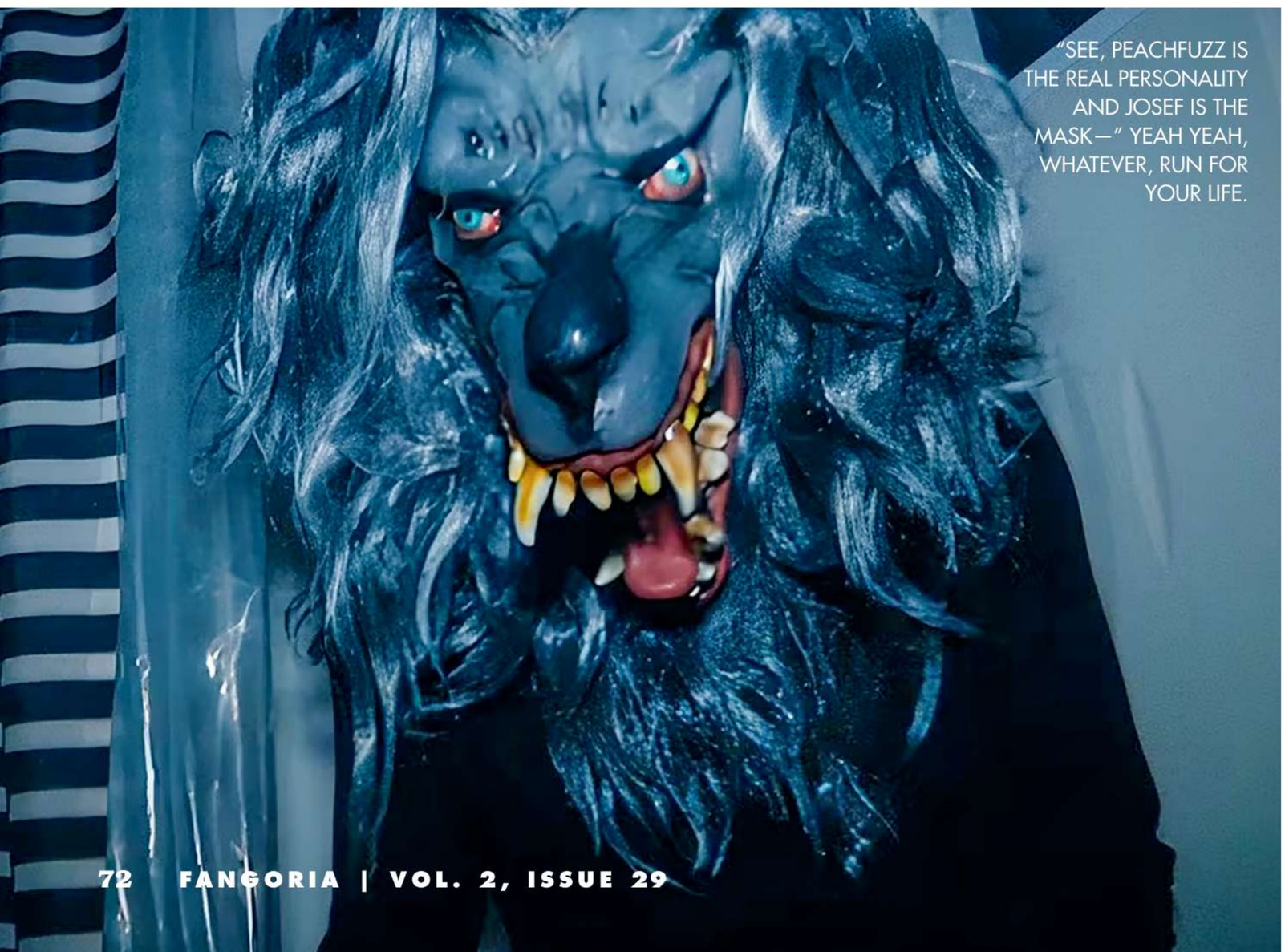
to be a little more free," Duplass says. "Certain scenarios lend themselves better to improvisation, while certain things are a little more tightly scripted, and we want to nail them down. So it's a combination of both. There's much more improvisation in the first film because we were figuring it out as we went along, and now we've sort of dialed it in a little bit more closely, but it's certainly not Shakespeare."

The first *Creep* film introduced viewers to director and co-creator Patrick Brice as lead protagonist Aaron, whom fans often lovingly refer to as "The Greatest Person Who Ever Lived" (a superlative posthumously christened upon him by Josef). Brice and his character (R.I.P.) have a few traits in common, and Brice's dynamic with Duplass bled into the onscreen chemistry.

"I love Patrick and he loves me, and the nature of my male relationships tends to be very intimate and very tender," says Duplass, acknowledging, "and I'm a Southern-born North American male, and I've discovered that that's a strange thing. And I've been putting those relationships on screen for a long time. I think that it was particularly new to put inside of the horror genre for a lot of audience members, but it wasn't new for me. So part of that was conscious, but part of that is just where my interest lies."

Josef is soft-spoken, curious, and bubbling with eccentricities that surface depending on his prey du jour. He has a flair for the cinematic flowing through his veins, recording every individual encounter to its own VHS tape, ultimately inspiring the name for the current series in lieu of a *Creep 3* (which may still be on the table in the future). Horror aficionados will be hard-pressed to find a more tender killer than Peachfuzz.

"I don't say this lightly and I want to be careful in the way that I say it, but there is a lot of me in this character. The desire to be close to people, the desire to skip the small talk and get to a more in-depth and interesting conversation, I take that and I dial that up to 11 or more with this character," Duplass reveals. "And his cadence and his rhythms are quite different than mine. So usually, when we show up to do *The Creep Tapes*, the first couple of takes Patrick has to take me aside and say, "Oh, remember, this is Josef." And sometimes I'll even watch a clip of something to get myself back. But the core behavior of someone who is quickly and deeply obsessed with connection and people, isn't hard for me to attach to, for better or worse."



Duplass keeps most of Josef's secrets close to the chest, but is willing to share a few observations he's made in crafting the Peachfuzz persona. "I think as to the tenderness of Josef, I've always seen him as someone who is deeply longing to make a connection and having a really hard time figuring out exactly who he is and what he has to offer. And people-pleasing so much through his life that he's shape-shifted so many times, it's hard for him to figure out who he really is. And he'll lean into anything that he perceives as a deep connection, and he'll ride that thing for all it's worth. And usually it doesn't go well by the end of it, for his victims or for him. And to me, there's an inherent sweetness about what he wants. That's at the core of it all, I think."

There is a charming politeness that permeates every interaction on and offscreen with the filmmakers, and a conviction to protect the art created in their world. Beneath the sophisticated passion for film and their commitment to their craft, Brice and Duplass covet the *Creep* legacy like schoolyard best friends who have invented a secret society, waiting for the teacher to look away long enough to sneak off to undisclosed woods with only their backpacks, cameras, and another best friend or two bold enough to take the pinky promise rite of passage.

"This process is more akin to what it was like with me and my brother walking around with VHS cameras in the late '80s, and that feeling of, 'I'm not making this with anybody's money or creative considerations in mind, other than what speaks to me, what makes me giggle and cringe.' It's very instinctual in that way," Duplass beams. "And look, some people are capable of making beautiful pieces of art with massive amounts of money and massive amounts of notes. I don't know how to make those things." 💀

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— Don Mancini, Creator of CHUCKY

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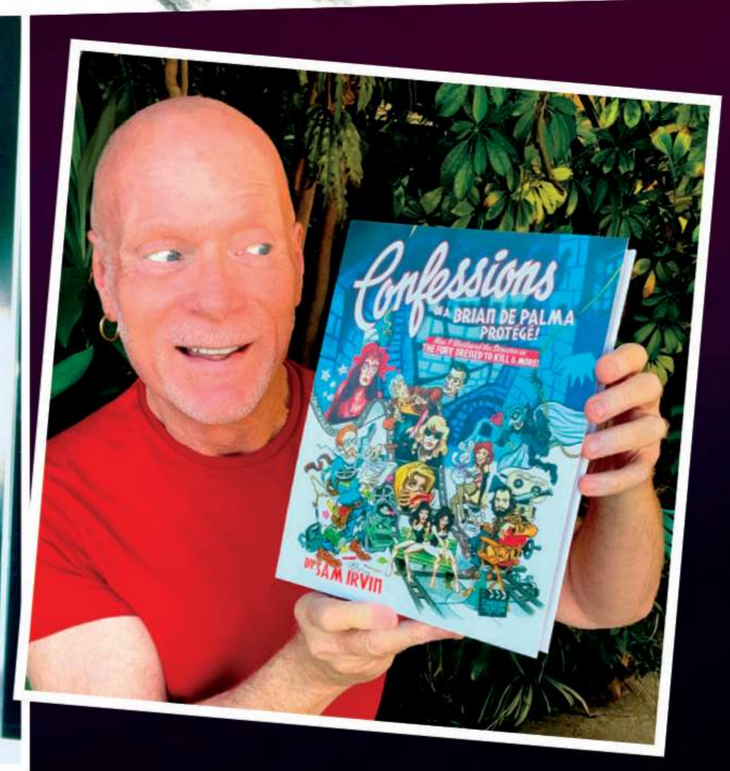

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BONE LAKE

MAKES HORROR HORNY AGAIN

THE LATEST ENTRY IN THE "AIRBNB NIGHTMARE" SUBGENRE AMPS UP THE GORE — AND THE SENSUALITY.

By Kimberly Leszak

MERCEDES BRYCE MORGAN'S NEW FILM IS FLESHY. NOT THE WAXY, GERONTOPHOBIC BODY HORROR SORT. FLESHY LIKE THE RIPE PULP IN A WET, JUICY CHERRY PIERCED WITH A COCKTAIL SWORD. IN AN ERA OF LARGELY SEXLESS CINEMA, *BONE LAKE* IS READY TO SKIP THE TOE SKIMMING AND MAKE HORROR HORNY AGAIN. AFTER A SHOCKING GORE PORN OPENING SEQUENCE, THE FILM'S SUBSEQUENT CHOICES MAY NOT BE SEEN COMING BUT, OH BOY, DO THEY COME.

SEX AND DEATH: SAGE (MADDIE HASSON) AND CIN (ANDRA NECHITA, PREVIOUS PAGE) ILLUSTRATE THE BLOODY, BONER-Y BINARY OF THE FILM.

The director knew she'd bitten into something delectably complex when she first read the script penned by Joshua Friedlander. "I was at Sundance, and I dropped everything to read it. And what really attracted me to it was, yes, the fleshy quality — that's a great adjective to describe this movie — but also the fact that there were these plot twists that made me clutch my pearls and yell out loud, 'Oh my god, did that really just happen?'"

Morgan is most recently known to horror fans for her trippy and unhinged 2022 thriller *Spoonful of Sugar*, but this film takes her eccentric flair for intricacies to intimately fresh no-no places. Its premise: Two attractive young couples find themselves accidentally booked for the same luxury vacation rental, and decide to suck up the snafu and share the house for the weekend. What could go wrong?

Lots. You could pile on the trigger warnings in this film and still miss a few, but the artistic attention to detail demonstrates the difference between shocking and shock value. The cinematic threads nod to sexy Euro thrillers of the '70s with sultriness woven so tightly that it shows up in the wallpaper. In *Bone Lake* food is sexy, bathtime is sexy, and sheer neon negligees are outerwear again — we think that's pretty sexy, too.

"We reference a lot of different things. But not all horror influences," Morgan shares. "We looked at *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* because it's also 'couple pitted against couple in a house,' and seeing how that unfurls. But then there's so many horror references for horror fans in there. We looked at *Evil Dead 2* because that's some of the best shot design of all time, in my opinion, and a lot of other fun things sprinkled in there."

There are winding forest shots and pithy punchlines in *Bone Lake* to boot. Despite being entirely unsupernatural, though, the vibes at the film's seemingly quaint lakeside oasis are undeniably spooky.

The director is careful to avoid spoilers, but rest assured the experience of this film is more complicated than its twists, with irreplicable sensations and visceral responses to watching it. Much like reading the plot of *Let's Scare Jessica To Death* or *Spider Baby* might spoil the twists, it's the atmosphere that endures as the meat of the watch.

There is also a surprising amount of humor in this very sexy and spiraling story that elicits a mixture of gasps and laughter from live audiences. "I think overall the most surprising, wonderful thing to me is how verbal audiences have been in the theater. I am a *Rocky Horror* fan through and through, and so my favorite movie theater experience is people yelling at the screen," the director states with a smile. "And I think what's been really wonderful is seeing people yell at the screen and getting excited. And I think you don't always see that in movie theaters, but this movie seems to create that reaction in people."

Set in a house that rivals grand haunted manors of cinema, Morgan knew this romantic getaway gone wrong was all about location, location, location. "We looked at a lot of different houses. I think it's especially hard with horror movies; there's this trope that's wonderfully done a lot, but it's the 'cabin in the woods,' or we've also seen a more modern version of that

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BLEECKER STREET MEDIA

DIRECTOR MERCEDES BRYCE MORGAN KEEPS THE SET SAFE AND SEXY.

recently. We wanted to do something that felt very aspirational as this fun, sexy getaway, but there's all of these rooms that you get to discover. With this house in particular, we found something that fit that purpose, but we also built a set within our house."

There's that attention to detail again. The location and the frame may have been perfect, but Morgan tells us that every single room had to be redone to get the dangerously erotic subtleties just *so* to bring these strange yet unnervingly convincing relationship dynamics to life.

If vacation rental horrors have been hot in the post lockdown film world, the topic of intimacy coordinators is hotter, and this is a film that could leave audiences wondering. The choice to use one is a no-brainer for Morgan, as it should be, and the sexy and violent production prioritized the safety of its cast at every step.

"I think that it should be approached the same way we approach a dancing or a fight scene," Morgan asserts, demonstrating this is the time and place for the choreography of sex. "Because at the end of day, they are actors — in the same way that they're not really getting stabbed, we're not actually having them engage in sex. If we approach it in a professional way, then everyone can feel good about it."

The psychological unraveling of the film's four main characters is just as intimate. We're presented with two couples: Andra Nechita's seductive femme Cin and Alex Roe's assured jock Will, and girl-next-door Sage (Maddie Hasson) and bookishly handsome writer Diego (Marco Pigossi). All four are alluring archetypes of erotic fantasy, but the overt usage, Morgan knew, couldn't feel overdone. The electric chemistry of both couples had to flow in every direction to bring Morgan's vision to life.

Bone Lake has as many surprises for audiences as there are rooms in its sprawling mansion, and leaves audiences juicy with hope that more filmmakers will find comfort in less vanilla spaces. Throughout the film, there are moments of frivolity that just plunge suddenly and seamlessly into drama. It's very unique to Morgan's work thus far, all rendered via indelible imagery (thanks to cinematographer Nick Matthews): an unforgettable chessboard scene, a bedroom timelapse reminiscent of the *Saw* franchise, and ample bisexual lighting in the BDSM room (that's right), all sandwiched cushily inside a stunning game of cat and mouse.

But what's it like to make a horror film with so many elements of discomfort that are heightened in a post-2020 world? Morgan has a lot of thoughts on that. "I like dark things that make me feel uncomfortable; it makes me feel more connected to other humans," she says. "If I read something that shocks me, I go, 'Oh, I feel alive.'"

And the film's sexuality, she knows, is part of that.

"I think it's bold," she says. "It's interesting because when I first started out directing years back, I was told 'take sex out of your pitch decks.' And then I was told 'put them back in.' I think that sexy movies are a recession indicator," she quips. "People want to punch through things. And I think this is very much where people go, 'You know what? Let's shake it up again. We feel like everything is so hard, let's just let loose.' And I think we see us constantly flip-flop. I'm so glad that we're back in our Sexy Movies era."

SAGE AND DIEGO (MARCO PIGOSSI) REALIZE THEY'RE BEING WATCHED... AND NOT JUST BY US.

TRICK OR TEATS!

Fango Visits the Set of V/H/S HALLOWEEN

BY SEAN ABLEY

The word on everyone's lips is "milk" when FANGORIA visits the set of *V/H/S/Halloween*, the eighth entry in the long-running found footage franchise. Once the visit is confirmed, we're told via email to "Please wear your best 'I don't want to get covered in blood, feces, and spoiled milk' outfit." As soon as we arrive, line producer Jason Korstad spends the hike from the crew parking lot regaling us with the wet details of the previous day's lactose-filled shoot. When asked, producer Josh Goldbloom offers, "This is the first time where I really thought I was going to vomit on set." Everyone we meet is excited to let Fango know that writer/director Anna Zlokovic's segment, "Coochie Coochie Coo," is "lactoriffic."

"We're a milk-heavy production," Zlokovic confirms. "We got a lot of milky themes. Milk is a huge part of the mythology [of the film] in a way, subtly, and happens to be a huge part of this set dressing as well, because it leaks from places and lands on the floor." Indeed, one of the ceiling lights resembles a nipple, and so the decision is made to have milk pour out of the fixture as well. To this, Goldbloom reiterates: "I don't fuck with milk."

Zlokovic's previous feature, *Appendage*, was a body horror meditation on how our inner monologue can eat us alive. For *V/H/S/Halloween*, the writer/director is exploring the effect of outside forces in a transformative way: "I just love gross shit," she offers. "I get a visceral response from body horror and just anything disgusting, and I like feeling bad sometimes. I think it's almost like exorcising the dark feelings inside," she reasons. "And so, if you can film them, you can control them."

The *V/H/S/Halloween* location is part of what was once an actual neighborhood filled with single-family homes, a school, a hospital, a sanitarium, and a small orchard along one border. Now the entire area is a film set for hire, which is perfect for *V/H/S* – with so many different buildings from which to choose, the franchise has made liberal use of this locale for multiple previous segments.

(THIS PAGE AND PREVIOUS) ELENA MUSSER SUITS UP AS "MOMMY."

Today we're in a decrepit two-story house twenty yards from the orange grove that was used in the harrowing "Live and Let Dive" segment from *V/H/S/Beyond*.

"Will we see the milk?" is the question from the art department as Zlokovic blocks pajama-clad actor Natalia Montgomery Fernandez for a long "oner" shot that travels from the second floor to the basement of the darkened house. She's trailed by the art department, the cinematographer, the script supervisor, the on-set sound operator, and the assistant director, up and down the stairs, each taking notes or giving direction to their own teams. The segment is based on some of the writer/director's real-life, late-teen shenanigans: "[The characters are] eighteen and they decide to go trick-or-treating, even though, technically, they're too old to trick-or-treat," Zlokovic explains during a break. "This is what me and my best friend did before we went to college, and we dressed as babies." Does her friend know their adventures are being given the *V/H/S* treatment? "Oh, fuck yeah!" Zlokovic exclaims. "I sent her the script and she was like, 'Oh my God!'" When asked for comment, Zlokovic's friend in question, Zoe, responds, "I read the whole thing immediately after she sent it, jaw on the floor…I didn't want it to end! Definitely a proud bestie moment."

Goldbloom is now on his fifth *V/H/S* film in five years, and when asked how he and the team keep the franchise fresh, he offers, "*V/H/S* can be the rare franchise that consistently gets better over time, and I think it's because we don't follow any single storyline. We follow filmmakers, we follow visions." In addition to Zlokovic, this installment features the creativity of Bryan M. Ferguson (*Pumpkin Guts*), Casper Kelly (*Too Many Cooks*, *Adult Swim Yule Log*), Micheline Pitt-Norman and R.H. Norman (*Cosmetic*), Alex Ross Perry (*Her Smell*, *Queen of Earth*), and Paco Plaza (*REC*, *Verónica*). "There's no constraints," Goldbloom continues. "It's 'how far outside the box can we exist?'"

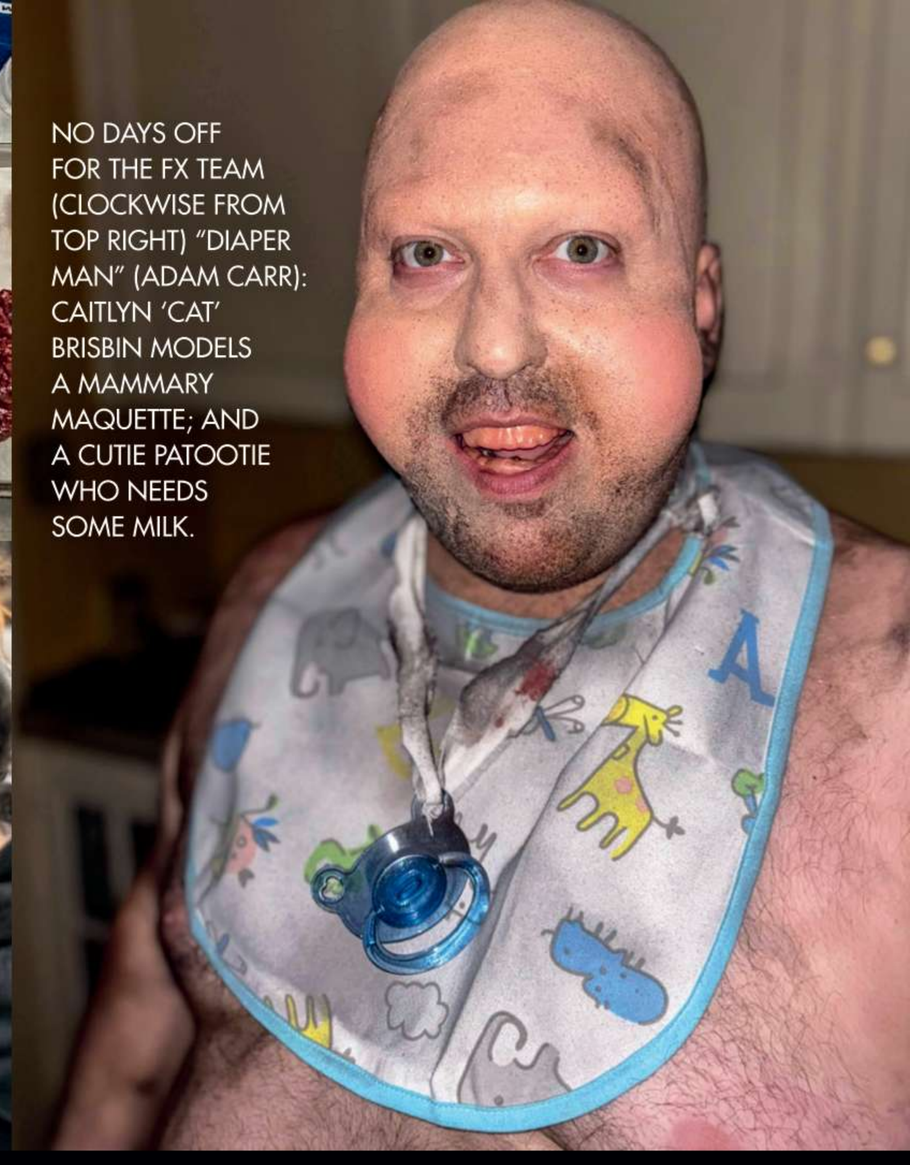
While Fango waits for the first shot, we're introduced to Alex Familian, the segment's editor (and Zlokovic's husband), who is cutting the film in real time as the company shoots. He's set up in the corner of a stifling hot, pitch black bedroom on the second floor, and offers to show us footage from the previous day. Fango has seen blood, guts, viscera, and even offal while visiting sets large and small, but this is our first experience with horror milk. Good news for Fango fans: the footage is, indeed, revolting.

Zlokovic and cinematographer Powell Robinson's meticulous approach to this complex shot is buoyed by the expectations of an audience well acquainted with the *V/H/S* found footage aesthetic. This moment is especially complicated because, as is the case in much of the *V/H/S* universe, the footage is found on a "real" person's camera. The burden for Zlokovic to justify why her characters continue to film while being horror milked is equal to that of Powell's to capture footage as if shot by a panicked eighteen-year-old girl and not a professional DP. The skill needed to make these films look amateur is not inconsequential, and yet the irony for Robinson is "…having to unlearn all of the things I have learned to do well as an operator."

Robinson's technique for establishing the "real" feel of "Coochie Coochie Coo" is to allow the actors to actually film the first few minutes of the segment. "The point of giving [the camera] to them is letting all the fun mistakes and [non]-professionalism of the operation really sell it," he explains. From that point on, the actors are positioned directly behind him as he recreates their amateur cinematography. "My dad's a sound engineer, and he always told me that you can get away with a synth or a fake instrument if you start by someone hearing the real instrument."

The time to roll camera has come. As the long tracking shot unfolds, the disturbing work of the Russell FX team, Sierra Spence and Josh Russell, is in full effect. Having previously contributed to *V/H/S/85*, the duo is back to execute Zlokovic's warped vision, which includes adults transformed into babies at scale, and a "mommy" figure who is responsible for feeding them the omnipresent milk. "We wanted to do something aged and old, with the droopy, saggy breasts, six of them," explains Spence. The giant babies involve bloated appliances, and "…little gummies instead of teeth." And the milk? "Well, the milk is everywhere," opines Sierra. "So yeah, it's disgusting."

After just a few takes, Zlokovic and Robinson get what they need, and Fango avails itself of the craft services table while the crew sets up the next shot. We chat again with Goldbloom, who offers his perspective on what makes a *V/H/S* movie rise above in a very crowded genre: "How far can we push this? How far can we punch above our weight class, right?" he asks rhetorically, his excitement palpable as he continues. "What's something where the audience will go, 'Holy fuck, I've never seen this before'?" That question is answered moments later when we hear over an open walkie that "Diaper Man is walking to set." 💀



NO DAYS OFF FOR THE FX TEAM (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT) "DIAPER MAN" (ADAM CARR): CAITLYN 'CAT' BRISBIN MODELS A MAMMARY MAQUETTE; AND A CUTIE PATOOTIE WHO NEEDS SOME MILK.

A CHEERLEADER (CHARLOTTE CURTIS) IS ALL SMILES WHILE ANOTHER CAST MEMBER HANGS AROUND.

PHOTOS BY CAITLYN BRISBIN, POWELL ROBINSON, SIERRA SPENCE, LAURA YOUNG, JOSH GOLDBLOOM / COURTESY OF SHUDDER AND IFC

CARSON AND ERIK BLOOMQUIST
INVITE YOU TO GET SOME

SHELF

BY BRETT GALLMAN

THE *FOUNDER'S DAY* FILMMAKERS
HOLD SPACE FOR HEALING.

Two years after unleashing masked slasher mayhem with *Founder's Day*, prolific filmmakers Carson and Erik Bloomquist return with *Self-Help*, a different kind of film about the masks we wear and shed in our everyday lives. It's haunted by another, more banal, duplicitous evil that feels all too familiar in a modern landscape teeming with grifts, scams, and cult mentality. As the title implies, the film explores the tragic desperation so many people feel in the pursuit of improving their lives – sometimes by any means necessary.

Thanks to a horrific incident at a childhood birthday party, Olivia (Landry Bender) has been estranged from her mother, Rebecca (Amy Hargreaves). The space between them only widened following the death of Olivia's father, especially since Rebecca has found solace in Curtis Clark (Jake Weber), an enigmatic self-improvement guru whose methods tout spiritual rebirth. Concerned that her mother may have been drawn into a cult, Olivia accepts an invitation to Curtis' rural compound, where her suspicions are quickly confirmed. The promised self-actualization comes with a cost: whether it's a monetary offering or a pound of flesh, no one is safe from Curtis' conniving scheme.

The Bloomquists didn't have to look very far to find inspiration for *Self-Help*, pointing towards recent headlines chronicling the ordeals of unwitting victims of fraud. "There's been a lot in the news about groupthink and people getting seduced into bad decisions," Carson offers. "We saw more and more stories about self-help groups, retreats, and online scams." The duo also points to an increasingly predatory online ecosystem that offers the illusion of connection but often harbors something much more sinister. "You see these folks who get seduced because they want to belong and they need something to remind them of their own existence," he continues. "With how noisy the world is now and how overwhelming the internet is, it's not enough to just exist unto yourself – you have to be larger than yourself."

In *Self-Help*, this victimization dovetails with the even more menacing milieu of cults, a naturally disquieting space that allows the brothers to establish a perpetual sense of dread and unease. It's a pronounced departure from the frenzied splatter theatrics of their previous effort, and the more intimate tenor finds the Bloomquists flexing some more dramatic, restrained chops. "We love a giant ensemble cast and intersecting storylines, but we knew we weren't going to do another one of those after *Founder's Day*," Carson reveals. "We knew the cast was going to be a little smaller, but we still wanted to find ways to have the scope be as full." In this case, *Self-Help* finds its footing in the tense character dynamics that emerge between Olivia, Rebecca, and Curtis. "We wanted to explore the delicacy of fractured relationships and the exploitation of vulnerable people," Erik adds.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAINFRAME PICTURES

ABOVE: SOPHIE (MADISON LINTZ) LOOKS A BIT WARY OF BIG BAD WOLVES AFTER (BELOW AND FACING) SHE AND OLIVIA (LANDRY BENDER) ATTEND A "SEMINAR" BY CURTIS CLARK (JAKE WEBER).

While the Bloomquists do channel their inner Fulci by staging some gnarly ocular trauma, *Self-Help* relies less on gory outbursts and more on orchestrating a slow burn that erupts once Olivia unveils the truth. It's a mode the brothers are familiar with, and Carson admits to one of their previous outings being a guiding light. "The first movie we did under our banner was *Long Lost*, which had the bleak tone of a psychological thriller," he recalls. "We wanted to hearken back to that. I wouldn't call *Self-Help* a spiritual sequel, but it is tonally aligned with that sensibility and is a little bit more of a thriller than we've done recently."

With so much of this approach hinging on the fraught relationships between its characters, *Self-Help* leans on its compelling performances, and the Bloomquists are eager to praise their ensemble. After being a fixture in supporting roles for decades, Weber takes center stage with a demanding performance that requires him to put on many faces, both literally and figuratively, as the film begins to peel away his various layers. "In his introductory scene, he's actively menacing because he's running his cult and there's a degree of showmanship," Carson explains. "But then you see him acting normally against that more sinister backdrop, and everything starts to feel askew. There's a degree of paranoia about his motives." Fortuitous scheduling also helped to build Weber's presence on set into an enigma befitting a cult leader. "He actually came in for the end of the shoot," Erik says. "So we were able to build up the mythos of Curtis."

Olivia, however, sees right through that mythos and becomes a formidable counter thanks to Landry Bender, who also adopts several façades. While she seems like a harmless college student simply trying to reconnect with her mom, her trauma has fashioned her into a tough young woman, unafraid to defend herself through violent means. "We had a meeting and she resonated with the script," Erik recalls. "She understood the arc and appreciated how the story was grounded in something real." He goes on to compliment her performance, particularly during the

A REJECTED CULT MEMBER (ADAM WEPPLER) CONTINUES TO CLOWN AROUND THE COMPOUND.

NURSE COSTUMES CAN ONLY ADD TO THE CONFUSION IN A HALLOWEEN-SET HORROR MOVIE, AS SOPHIE IS ABOUT TO LEARN.

"HALLOWEEN'S ALWAYS BEEN OUR FAVORITE HOLIDAY, AND WE WANTED IT TO FEEL ORGANICALLY WOVEN INTO THE NARRATIVE. THEY SAY THE VEIL IS THINNER AROUND HALLOWEEN, AND THAT HAPPENS IN TERMS OF EVERYBODY'S VULNERABILITY."

– ERIK BLOOMQUIST

FOUNDERS DAY SUPERFAN KILEY MURRAY (LEFT) SUITS UP FOR A TRICK-OR-TREAT SCENE, AND A CAMEO/DREAM COME TRUE.

stretches of the film that put her in peril. "We shot quickly, and she was very game for all of the various stages of Olivia's journey," he raves. "The emotional shifts, the blood on her face – everything."

Frequent collaborator Amy Hargreaves also earns praise from the brothers, who insist her character is instrumental in putting a human face on the victims of cultists and grifters. Erik points to a pivotal moment later in the film that finds her reckoning with the truth behind her cult retreat: "I'm so happy with how that scene came out," he says. "We wanted to play it as real as possible, to strip away all of the elements and go as minimal as possible, and Amy brought it." Keeping those real, human stakes at the forefront was a priority for the Bloomquists: "We wanted to ground it in a way that reminded you that this happens – there are ramifications that can happen to someone you know."

A film boasting so many shifty characters naturally lends itself to the Halloween season, and the Bloomquists insist the All Hallows' Eve setting in *Self-Help* isn't just window dressing. "Halloween's always been our favorite holiday, and we wanted it to feel organically woven into the narrative," Erik explains before going on to explain its deeper significance to the story. "They say the veil is thinner around Halloween, and that happens in terms of everybody's vulnerability," he continues. "There's whatever they perceive as their true selves versus their false selves, and that veil is thinning too." Curtis's cult literalizes this notion by having its members adopt and then shed masks, and the Bloomquists took great care in crafting these façades. "We had a lot of discussion about those masks because at first they were going to all be animal masks," Erik recounts. "But we wanted these masks to feel like something you could find at a Goodwill but still distinct enough that it felt specific to the character, so it wasn't generic."

The duo confirms that it's also just downright fun to luxuriate in the holiday vibes throughout a production, particularly during the film's climax, which unfolds in an unexpectedly cozy, suburban Halloween. "We love Halloween movies, so we wanted to live in that a little bit," Erik says. In the spirit of Halloween mischief, the brothers took the opportunity include a clever Easter egg as a trick-or-treater dons the familiar *Founder's Day* mask. "That's Kiley Murray, who went and saw *Founder's Day* every single day." Erik reveals. "We met with her and her family, and they wanted to make it out to the *Self-Help* set. We needed trick-or-treaters, so she wore the Founder costume – she made it herself, actually." For the Bloomquists, it was a heartening moment that speaks to the communal nature of the horror world. "It's so profound to us, the idea that we made someone's favorite horror movie – it reminds us of what we felt when we were younger," Erik says. "It was a really cool thing to connect like that, and that's why we do this – these moments are bigger than us." 💀

NOT WANTING SOPHIE TO HAVE ALL THE FUN, OLIVIA GETS HER OWN BLOOD-COVERED MOMENT IN THE FILM.

Final Edition

Ernest Dickerson's

ONE DAY OF THE DEAD

By Michael Varrati

A Legendary Filmmaker's Game-Changing Gig on George A. Romero's Classic

With an impressive roster of film and television credits to his name, Ernest Dickerson's involvement in the opening sequence of one particular horror classic still occasionally flies under the radar: George A. Romero's *Day of the Dead*.

Already part of the Romero-verse thanks to his work as a cinematographer on the first two seasons of *Tales from the Darkside*, it was Dickerson's collaboration with Romero's DP Michael Gornick that led him to the zombie-filled streets of Florida.

Invited by Gornick to lens second unit for the film's opening, Dickerson recalls that the whole affair took place over one very long and sunny day.

"It was a bit of a traumatic shoot for me," Dickerson says, "because Florida sunshine is so bright... and the only lights they gave me were a little portable sun gun and two shiny boards; two reflectors on stands. So, I had a heck of a time because it was a bright, hot day."

Working under second unit director John Harrison and in concert with Tom Savini's crew who were prepping the living dead, Dickerson and the team managed to capture a wide array of imagery in their limited time – even if there were occasional complications.

"We did the alligator sitting on top of the pile of money...and the alligator was *not* happy," says Dickerson. "They had to tie him up and bring him out when the camera was ready. We'd start rolling and then they would cut the ties and jump out of the way... because after he was sitting there for a second or two, he would just start thrashing around."

THE DOWNTOWN AREA WAS BUSTLING THIS WEEK AS COLORFUL LOCALS (BELOW) FILLED THE STREETS.

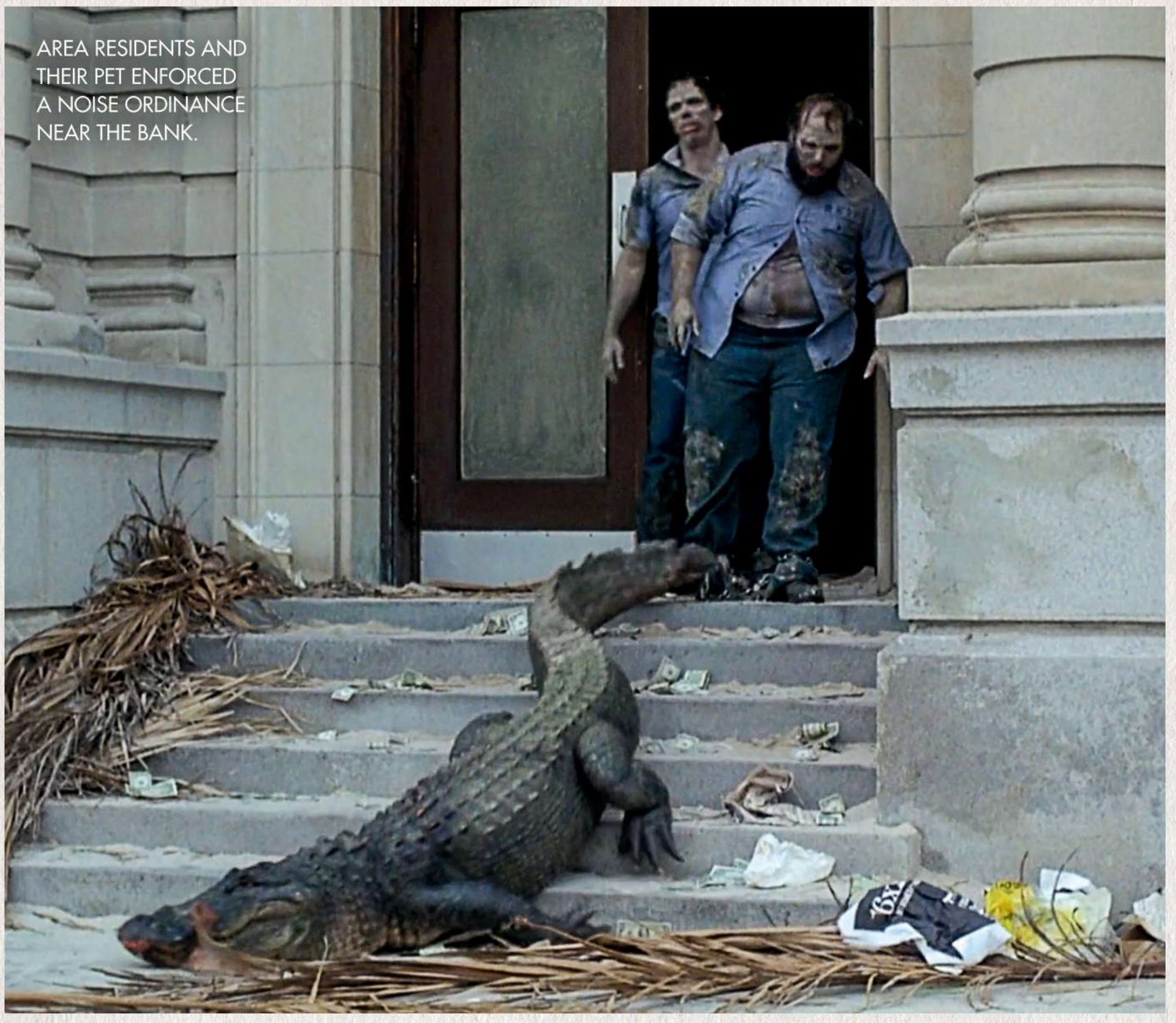
From rankled reptiles, zombie close-ups, and an indelible image of an open newspaper declaring "The Dead Walk," the day's capturing of footage culminated in a final shot of the living dead gathering en masse.

"The final shot, which we got right before we lost the light, had a high angle shot of several hundred zombies walking up this main street," says Dickerson. The shot is now an iconic moment from the series.

Despite his time spent with flesh-hungry ghouls, Dickerson's biggest scare on the project came about when it was time to review the footage.

Breaking his usual protocol of reviewing dailies in the production office, Romero rented out a local movie house on Sanibel Island, hoping to make it something of a special occasion.

"Since I had to catch a plane back home to New York, they put my stuff



AREA RESIDENTS AND THEIR PET ENFORCED A NOISE ORDINANCE NEAR THE BANK.

up first," Dickerson says of the review session. "I'm sitting with Michael Gornick on one side, John Harrison on the other, and George Romero sitting right behind me. The dailies came up and they were *dark*. It looked like bad day for night. I remember thinking, '…I couldn't have screwed up my exposures.' I could hear George fidgeting in his seat behind me… these little groans."

Dickerson made a beeline for the projector booth.

"Now, this is the deep south," says Dickerson, "the projectionist looked like he was about 90 years old. And here's this Black guy coming in, saying 'excuse me, sir, I think your projector light is dialed down too far.' He looked me up and down and said 'What you talking about? This is the way we always show our movies.'"

Dickerson, joined by Gornick, pulled the print for a closer look.

"Michael and I walk back down, we talk to George, and tell him that everything looks good when we hold the print up to the light; the projector bulb is dialed down way too far," says Dickerson.

His flight departure looming, Dickerson had to leave, certain that Romero remained unconvinced. "It was the most uncomfortable flight I've ever had," says Dickerson. "I was running through everything that I did the day before, thinking – could I have fucked this up somehow?"

Of course, if you've seen the film, you know the story has a happy ending.

"I was home about 20 minutes and the phone rang," says Dickerson. "It was Michael calling me saying, 'After you left, we pulled up our dailies. They looked the same way. We took it back to the office and everything looked fine.'"

The results of Dickerson's efforts on that single day in Florida not only helped set the tone for the rest of Romero's landmark third entry in the *Dead* series, but remains among many horror fans' favorite opening sequences.

"I thought we did a pretty good job of opening the film," he says. "That was really early in my career, and I was still trying to prove myself. I was hoping I didn't fuck it up."

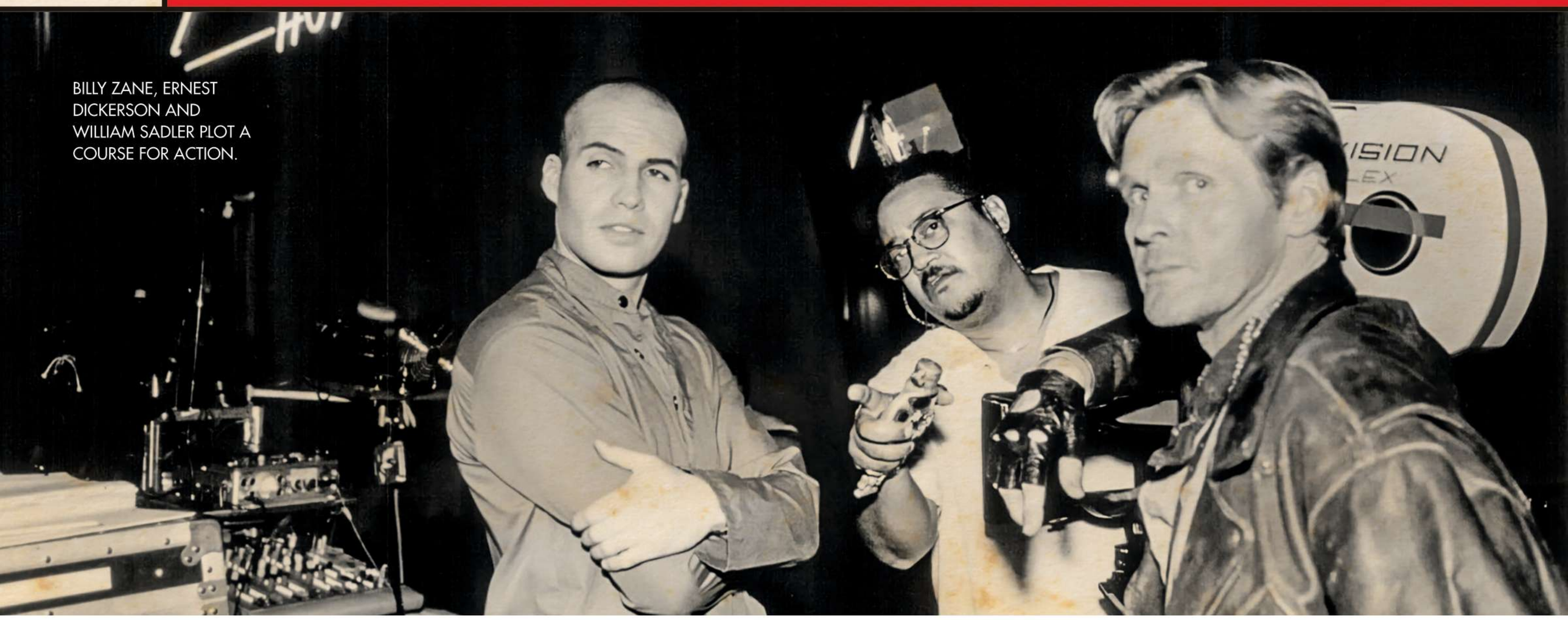
For a *Day* that's being celebrated forty years later, suffice to say: Mission accomplished. 💀

A LOCAL YOUTH (LEFT) PITCHES IN ON A CITY-WIDE CLEANUP PROJECT.

BY MICHAEL VARRATI

LEGACY IS KEY: ERNEST DICKERSON REFLECTS ON 30 YEARS OF DEMON KNIGHT

THE ICONIC DIRECTOR SHARES HIS OWN TALE FROM THE CRYPT.



BILLY ZANE, ERNEST DICKERSON AND WILLIAM SADLER PLOT A COURSE FOR ACTION.

For all its 1990s pop culture saturation, bringing the HBO version of *Tales the Crypt* to the big screen was easier said than done. Universal Pictures had committed to a three-picture deal with the series' executive producers, but selecting the actual movies proved difficult... and ultimately the first story chosen turned out to be a script that was never intended to be a *Tales from the Crypt* story in the first place.

Written by screenwriters Ethan Reiff, Cyrus Voris, and Mark Bishop, *Demon Knight* had been traveling around Hollywood since the late '80s, where it initially was intended to be directed by Tom Holland as a follow-up to *Child's Play*. Eventually, Holland moved on to other projects and the screenplay passed through the likes of *Pumpkinhead*'s Mark Carducci, *Pet Sematary*'s Mary Lambert, and even crossed the desk at Charles Band's Full Moon Features.

Yet, in each case, that vision of the story was not to be... until *Demon Knight* found its way to the Crypt.

Around this time, *Tales from the Crypt* producers met with filmmaker Ernest Dickerson, who had recently created buzz with his features *Juice* and *Surviving the Game*. After some creative brainstorming, it seemed *Demon Knight* had finally found its director... with one small catch.

"I never watched the show," laughs Dickerson. "I didn't really start watching television series until much later, when I started working on them."

However, Dickerson didn't view this as a deterrent, especially since the film's Crypt Keeper wraparound was to be directed by Gil Adler, leaving Dickerson to focus on the feature itself.

"My film starts with the car chase," he says, further adding that he was drawn to the movie because he loved siege stories. "The idea of people trapped in one spot and having to survive... like the original *Night of the Living Dead*. I love those stories."

Once officially on board, Dickerson worked on ways to amplify the material, inspired by his own love of

horror. In fact, one of the film's more... explosive elements was a direct result of Dickerson's enthusiasm for *Alien*.

"One of the coolest things about *Alien* is the creature's defense mechanism. You don't dare try to kill it," Dickerson says, referring to the iconic Xenomorph's acidic blood. "I thought, 'what if we did something like that with the demons?' You shoot out the eyes, but you better duck because the soul – the energy – is going to come out and just blast."

It was also Dickerson who helped push the demons into the more gnarly version you see on film.

"As originally written in the script, they would look like the people that had become possessed," says Dickerson, "just human figures. We started thinking that's not so interesting. Todd Masters [Make-Up FX] and I started brainstorming about what these demons could be like."

Assembling the right cast was absolutely crucial. William Sadler, a *Tales from the Crypt* alum, was already onboard to play the film's titular Demon Knight. Dickerson knew that finding the perfect foil for Sadler was key (pun intended).

"I had seen Billy Zane in *Dead Calm*," says Dickerson, "He played a psychotic killer, which really took me by surprise. I thought he was great."

After a meeting with Zane (during which Zane presented Dickerson with an array of hairpieces for the character, only for them to mutually decide the villain should be bald), the film had found its Collector.

The cast was rounded out by a staggering array of talent that included Jada Pinkett, CCH Pounder, Thomas Haden Church, Brenda Bakke, Charles Fleischer, Gary Farmer, and cult legend Dick Miller.

"It was fun," Dickerson says of the ensemble. "I let a lot of the folks just kind of fill out their characters."

That sense of fun led to some undeniable onscreen magic – and some truly unexpected on-set visitors, one of whom Dickerson, an admitted cinephile, directly referenced in the film... not knowing the person was actually going to stop by.

"I was really discovering Hong Kong films and the bullet and the arrow point-of-views," says Dickerson, referring to a moment in *Demon Knight* where William Sadler's character fires an arrow and the viewer follows the arrow's point-of-view trajectory into another character's head.

"I had ripped that off from Ringo Lam... and he came to set," Dickerson laughs. "The producers brought him by to meet us. I told him, 'You're my inspiration for some of this stuff.'"

Despite the spirited atmosphere and relative creative freedom, there were still some things that the *Demon Knight* team were ultimately unable to do.

"There was one idea that I had that Todd [Masters] and I were working on... we actually did conceptual artwork," says Dickerson. "When Brenda Bakke's character gets taken over, my original idea was 'Okay, she makes her money as a prostitute...' so I figured her weakness is her vagina. The original concept for her demonic presence, I wanted her stomach to open up in a vertical slit with teeth on either side... a vagina dentalis with a tongue that would come out and whip around Charlie Fleischer's neck and pull him inside."

"THE IDEA OF PEOPLE TRAPPED IN ONE SPOT AND HAVING TO SURVIVE... LIKE THE ORIGINAL NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD. I LOVE THOSE STORIES."

– ERNEST DICKERSON

ONE OF *DEMON KNIGHT'S* DISTINCTIVE DEMONS.

ZANE'S COLLECTOR COMMANDS A LEGION OF EVIL.

Inspired by the Japanese anime *Urotsukidōji: Legend of the Overfiend*, the provocative sequence was internally met with positivity, until the art found its way to the eyes of a producer's wife.

"I think it might've been Richard Donner's wife Lauren... she saw the art and said, 'That is not going in the movie. No way.' So, we had to come up with something fast and cheap," says Dickerson.

Still, many of Dickerson's cinematic inspirations did make it to screen.

In addition to the Ringo Lam homage, the final sequence of Billy Zane transforming into a larger demon was visually inspired by the "Night on Bald Mountain" segment in Disney's *Fantasia*. The scene was brought to life via a rod puppet and pyrotechnics courtesy of Jim Danforth and Joe Viskocil, respectively.

"It was an honor to work with the man [Viskocil] who did the explosions for the original *Star Wars* films, as well as Jim Danforth, Ray Harryhausen protégé," says Dickerson, reflecting on the team who helped bring the explosive finale to fruition.

With a mix of knowing nods and original ingenuity, *Demon Knight* found its place with horror fans eager not only for more *Tales from the Crypt*, but something grander. Still, despite the film's relatively strong box office performance ("We opened at number two"), initial reviews were mixed, and Dickerson theorizes it cost him work.

"I was attached to *Blade* early on," he says. "I brought in David Goyer to start writing it, but I got hints that New Line didn't like *Demon Knight*. And I think that might've been one reason I lost *Blade*."

Still, Dickerson couldn't help but notice *Demon Knight* kept coming back into his life. A significant factor of the film's continued celebration centers on the character of Jeryline, played by Jada Pinkett.

Ultimately revealed to be the new *Demon Knight*, Jeryline admittedly was fairly unique among horror movie survivors in that she was one of cinema's first truly prominent "final girls."

"I went to see *Menace II Society* and [Jada] was in that...and she really hit me. I said, 'Maybe that's her.' I wanted Jeryline to be small. Usually in horror films, it's the Black folks that die first. So, I figured nobody's going to see her as the last person standing," says Dickerson.

In the subsequent decades, the cult of *Demon Knight* has only grown, and now, as the film celebrates its 30th anniversary, Dickerson says there seems to be no end to discussion around the movie – including fans asking for a sequel.

"Even Billy Zane wants to do a second one," says Dickerson, recalling an occasion at a convention where he and the actor got to scheming. "We were saying... maybe Jada had a daughter... and now the daughter becomes the new *Demon Knight*."

Sequel or no, Dickerson seems proud of the legacy *Demon Knight* has left behind.

"We shot it in forty days," he says. "So yeah, it was a good low-budget film. We gave it our best and I'm just happy that people are still responding to it. They gave me an award at the Overlook Film Festival and they had a screening of *Demon Knight* to a packed house, and it was the first time I'd seen it in years on the big screen. It played really well. So, I'm sitting there looking at it, and I thought... okay, it's a pretty good movie after all." 💀

JERYLINE (JADA PINKETT) IS SHAKEN, BUT STEELS HERSELF FOR AN APOCALYPTIC BATTLE.

10 YEARS OF FEAR

SHUDDER

TURNS TEN, AND THE DECADE OF DREAD IS RECALLED BY SAM ZIMMERMAN, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT OF PROGRAMMING AND ACQUISITIONS AT THE HORROR STREAMING SERVICE.

BY ISAAC FELDBERG

Ten years after its launch, Shudder is still the streaming space's nightmare factory. Created as a horror-centric streaming service for AMC, Shudder has endured as a safe haven for all things spine-tingling. What's the secret to its success? Nothing less than a small team of horror aficionados hell-bent on giving subscribers – and each other – a good scare, according to Sam Zimmerman, Senior Vice President of Programming and Acquisitions at Shudder.

"At the time, we were a very independent group within AMC, and our little team had a lot of leeway to do what we were doing," recalls Zimmerman. This paved the way for exclusives and acquisitions. At launch, premiere titles included *Shrew's Nest*, a Spanish horror produced by Álex de la Iglesia ("It's a personal favorite: intense, gripping, and grotesque in its last thirty minutes, just a film that takes you to a wonderful place," Zimmerman notes), as well as *Dearest Sister*, from Laos, and *Beyond the Walls*, from France.

Often, one film led to another; while partnering with Kadokawa to release *Sadako vs. Kayako*, a *Ju-on* and *Ringu* series cross-over, the Shudder team learned one of Kōji Shiraishi's earlier films had never been properly released stateside. It was *Noroi: The Curse*, considered one of the scariest films ever made. Seizing the opportunity, Shudder not only became *Noroi*'s streaming home but turned its *Sadako vs. Kayako* activation at Fantastic Fest that year into a J-horror monument. "We had local artists build this pyramid of tube televisions connected to VCRs, then gave filmmakers Mickey Keating, Courtney and Hillary Andujar, and Zach Clark money to make their

versions of the *Ring* video," Zimmerman recalls. "We looped them in the hallway the entire time, this installation of strange TV sets and gnarly visions."

It was around this time that Shudder also started branching out into original TV programming, with Nicholas Lazo, Shudder's VP of Development and Production, pursuing docuseries (*Cursed Films*) alongside reality-TV competitions (*The Boulet Brothers' Dragula*), while resurrecting '80s horror anthology *Creepshow* and partnering with horror-host icon Joe Bob Briggs to revive his '90s variety show.

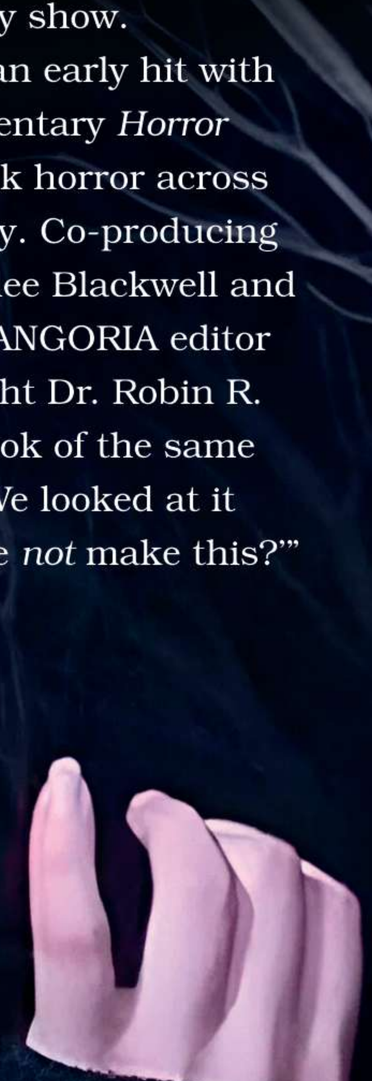
Shudder scored an early hit with 2019 feature documentary *Horror Noire*, exploring Black horror across American film history. Co-producing the project with Ashlee Blackwell and Danielle Burrows, FANGORIA editor Phil Nobile Jr. brought Dr. Robin R. Means Coleman's book of the same name to Shudder. "We looked at it and said, 'How do we *not* make this?'" Zimmerman recalls.

By this time, Shudder was also contributing to larger cultural dialogue by riding horror waves from Indonesia (*Impetigore*), South Korea (*Monstrum*), Mexico (*Belzebuth*), Canada (*Blood Quantum*), and more. Jayro Bustamante's *La Llorona* – which reimagined its weeping woman as a force for truth, justice, and reconciliation in post-genocide Guatemala – picked up awards momentum as its country's Oscar submission, winning critics'-group prizes and landing a Golden Globe nomination for foreign-language film.

Early in the pandemic, Zimmerman recalls Rob Savage's *Host* "met the moment in a crazy way," elevating Shudder's profile with its shot-on-Zoom story of friends who summon a demon during an online séance. "It was 2020, and Rob and his team pitched to us that they wanted to make this film over Zoom, that they knew how to do it; they pitched that to us in May, and it was on the service at the end of July," recalls Zimmerman. "It was a *shocking* timeline."

Savage drew such acclaim for *Host* that Hollywood came calling. From *Revenge*'s Coralie Fargeat scaling up to *The Substance* to *Infested*'s Sébastien Vaniček tackling the next *Evil Dead*, Shudder has come to serve as both an incubator and a springboard.

"By nature and necessity, our focus ends up being debut and second features," Zimmerman says. "That's where our resources lie: filmmakers



THE MANY SHADES OF SHUDDER (FROM TOP): *SADAKO VS. KAYAKO; IN A VIOLENT NATURE; HORROR NOIRE: A HISTORY OF BLACK HORROR; NOROI: THE CURSE.*

SHUDDER SHOWED US WHAT HAPPENS *WHEN EVIL LURKS* (LEFT), AND UNLEASHED A *MAD GOD* (RIGHT) UPON THE WORLD.

introducing themselves and making exciting statements before heading off to work at a larger scale."

Other times, filmmakers remain in the fold. John Adams, Toby Poser, and their daughter Zelda Adams – the Adams family – broke out with *The Deeper You Dig* when it streamed on Shudder and are now readying *Mother of Flies*, their third consecutive Shudder original. After Demián Rugna made *Terrified*, he returned to Shudder with *When Evil Lurks*; Ireland's Damian Mc Carthy followed *Caveat* with *Oddity*. Shudder has increased its theatrical distribution footprint in recent years, partnering closely with Independent Film Company (IFC) to mount successful theatrical campaigns for its buzziest titles, like those two, or – in another Shudder milestone – Kyle Edward Ball's lo-fi *Skinamarink*, which grossed $2 million against a $15,000 budget despite leaking online months before its release.

"It famously became a viral sensation, and there's this misconception that happened and then we bought *Skinamarink*," he says. "We had *Skinamarink* the whole time; we'd had it since the summer before. It was in our hands when the leak happened – which was concerning but not world-ending. The benefit of what that did is that it blew up in a way that let our colleagues at IFC see the demand for it; what's stunning is how quickly they mounted that release."

Zimmerman looks back on *Skinamarink* as a signature film. "It was one of those movies that allowed Shudder to say: this is who we are. We think of horror in a million different ways," he says. "It can be *this* weird, experimental, and this frightening, all at once." Releasing *Mad God*, from stop-motion animator Phil Tippett, was similarly brand-defining. Brought to the team by Colin Geddes, who produced it, this thirty-years-in-the-works magnum opus became a midnight-movie sensation in Shudder's hands, making back twice its Kickstarter-raised budget.

"We wanted the privilege of working with this storied individual, nothing less than an icon and a genius," Zimmerman says. The same was true of *The Amusement Park*, George Romero's lost film from 1975. "It was less that film rights were complicated than that Romero's foundation needed to know we'd take good care of it," he explains. "It's the work of an iconic filmmaker, rarely seen, more surreally absurd and aggressive than outright horror. We were the right home."

Reflecting on Shudder's first ten years, Zimmerman has more memories of festivals, parties, and premieres than he can count, all of which made clear the rabid nature of Shudder's fanbase, but he mentions a recent one. On Friday the 13th, this past June, the Shudder community united at Wild Heart Tattoo Shop in Brooklyn, to mark the anniversary with special Shudder flash tattoos. "That event was born of myself, and [veteran IFC/Shudder publicists] Danielle Freiberg and Guillermo Restrepo, all deciding to get *In A Violent Nature* tattoos," he recalls. "We realized, 'Why shouldn't we expand this further?' We're horror fans. We all have tattoos." And so Shudder celebrated ten years by inking attendees with designs inspired by *Late Night with the Devil*, Peachfuzz from *The Creep Tapes*, *Clown in a Cornfield*, and more.

"It was such a beautiful day," Zimmerman says. "At Shudder, we're often talking about the most heinous stuff ever put to screen. But what's funny to me is that this community has also always been extremely wholesome. We ended that event by screening the Adams family's *Hellbender*, and that's what Shudder has become. It's family." 💀

SHUDDER TURNED THE YA-LEANING NOVEL *CLOWN IN A CORNFIELD* INTO A GNARLY LITTLE SLASHER FLICK.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF AMC NETWORKS AND SHUDDER

WITCH, PLEASE

CRACKING OPEN PEACHES CHRIST'S *TERROR VAULT*

BY SEAN ABLEY

PEACHES CHRIST SERVES UP A HORRIFYING LIVE EXPERIENCE, FEATURING (PREVIOUS PAGE) DELILIAH BLACKHEART AS CHEF GRISTLEMORROW.

Peaches Christ is going to melt a witch, and FANGORIA has traveled to San Francisco to watch. The occasion is a video shoot for "Hexed," the newest *Terror Vault* immersive haunted attraction created by Peaches Christ, a.k.a. Joshua Grannell, and David Flower. The decidedly adult Halloween spooky spectacular is live and in-person, but today Grannell, Flower, and The Little Daddies will be shooting a trailer for this mashup of drag, old-school haunt, and twisted horror.

After a commute via driverless cab, courtesy of our robot overlords, we're greeted by company manager Nihat Karaarslan, who also happens to be Grannell's husband. Karaarslan will do a little bit of everything today, from running props to grabbing lunch and acting, but at the moment, he's leading us through the labyrinth that is the Old San Francisco Mint. The historic building, long ago converted into an event space and managed by venue activation firm Non Plus Ultra, is divided into areas both renovated and "decrepit" (Flower's description). The latter is where *Terror Vault* lives. The third floor production offices, where Grannell and Flower's production companies have resided since 2018, are the clubhouse of every monster kid and theater nerd's fantasy. Every room is filled floor to ceiling with years worth of props, costumes, set pieces, posters, memorabilia, merch, and drag detritus – with Peaches Christ's many iterations haunting every corner.

The shoot has started and we pass by directors/producers Matthew Mourgides and Ryan Reynolds, director of photography Connor Bjornson, and grip Pedro Penteado – collectively known as The Little Daddies (per Grannell) – hard at work with a camcorder shooting a '90s-style video clip that will appear in the trailer. There are a dozen or more short scenes and stills like this to be shot over the course of the two-day shoot, but the main event today is witch melting.

LEAD SFX MAKEUP DESIGNER JASON HENRICKS KEEPS BUSY, READYING PERFORMERS STEVEN TODD (LEFT) AND NATASHA NIGHTMARE (RIGHT).

Horror-themed burlesque performer Natasha Nightmare is playing Slovenia, a gnarled crone who will meet her goo-spewing demise in just a few hours. In truly Hollywood fashion, Nightmare was discovered by Grannell when he invited the members of a flash mob dance group to play zombies after seeing their performance of "Thriller." "I remember the first email that I got from Peaches Christ," Nightmare gushes. "I showed all my friends, 'Peaches Christ emailed me!'"

Fango then finds Grannell deep in conversation with costume designer Lisa Carver. The subject at hand: how to costume a mostly naked witch. The wizened crone's body suit, complete with pendulous, gravity-affected breasts, was created by make-up effects artist and former *Face Off* contestant, Jason Henricks: "She's a very disgusting, rotting carcass of a woman," says the proud papa. True to his word, the full-body prosthetic pushes the boundaries of nudity in a polite society, which is a bullseye for the *Terror Vault* live show aesthetic. However, a trailer meant for mass consumption by the normies requires a modicum of modesty, so the decision is made that grandma's bare boobs are fine, but flesh-colored tights are needed for her lady business.

Slovenia's bottom half decided, Grannell and Flower take a moment to chat with Fango about the aesthetics of the live show: "David and I wanted [the experience] to feel more like a movie," offers Grannell. Flower agrees and adds, "The magic of this show is that we are very much married to the

PHOTOS BY JEREMY GABLE AND CAMILLO KEARNS

idea of doing practical illusions [...] Our thing is – you're here in person. We're going to do it right in front of you." As for the subject matter of "Hexed," after previous years of cults, alien abductions, seances, and alternate dimensions, Grannell explains that he and Flower decided to "lean into something we both really, really love – something that is just classic for us, and that's witches." As for the melting, "We have to have a witch melt because both David and I are obsessed with *The Wizard of Oz*, and we probably think Margaret Hamilton's the best screen witch that will ever exist in the history of cinema. And so we're doing it in our own way," Grannell declares.

The time has come to melt that witch. Despite knowing what we're seeing is a prosthetic body suit, now that Henricks's creation is on Nightmare's body as she creeps around the set, averting one's eyes seems appropriate. The actor positions herself on an altar designed by Flower and repeatedly rehearses melting into the floor. The effect requires her to deliver lines while walking backwards barefoot down a steep ramp into the raised floor while the set fills with fog – and look like she's melting while doing so. Off to the side, Grannell and Mourgides have a *sotto voce* conversation.

"Is goo going to come out of her mouth?" asks Mourgides.

"Yes," answers Grannell.

"Does she know that?"

"No..."

When asked, Nightmare is game for spewing mouthfuls of green goo, which is kept in a sealed container for freshness. Still, watching the actor repeatedly fill her mouth with the thick, green ooze is a bit gag-inducing. The cameras roll on the scene, and Nightmare dutifully spews the fluorescent fluid while reciting her lines over and over until they get the shot. A witch has been properly melted.

The final shot of the day is Grannell's first time in front of the camera for the trailer. In boy drag, he'll play a cult leader with a cadre of followers. The true collaborative spirit of the production is on display as Grannell asks the gathered staff and crew for cult member volunteers. Happily joining the cult are Karaarslan, Henricks, Grannell's executive administrator Vanessa Fitzpatrick, and... Fango! Eagle eyes will spot a split-second cameo by this writer wearing a hooded cowl, ready to worship a demon.

As Fango leaves the location at the end of the day, we ask Flower and Grannell what sets *Terror Vault* apart from traditional immersive scarefests: "What happens in a lot of haunts is you'll go into a room and there's a bunch of clowns, and then you go into the next room and you're constantly having all this barrage of different characters, but you never get emotionally attached to *any* of these characters," explains Flower. "So what we've done is you'll be with a character through four or five scenes [...] you'll get invested in the entire story and you also buy into that character."

Grannell adds that they're not afraid of scaring off the normies with "Hexed," or ever. "[We're] doing the highbrow and the low-brow and mashing it up and making it unapologetically weird and queer," he explains. As far as how his personal aesthetic manifests in the mix, he tells Fango, "I've always been a disruptor. I have no interest in being family-friendly." Even when melting a witch? Fango asks. Grannell smiles. "It's not *The Wizard of Oz*." 💀

CREAM AS MINERVA MOANS MAKES HER CASE FOR TOP BILE-ING.

ACTOR KEITH RAJALA FENDS OFF A TRIO OF GHOULS.

DREAD AND LOVING IT

BY YULISSA MORALES

Halloween is my favorite time of the year. Last year, I dressed up as Gene Simmons and my friends/husband dressed up as the rest of KISS. I highly recommend this; the face paint and leather give you permission to misbehave. I've been Elvira, Greta the Gremlin, Elvis and of course Tiffany. This year, I got nothin'! So I thought maybe we can try to find some inspo as we go through some upcoming indie releases and some *gentle* promotion.

WILL TYGA'S JESTER (LEFT) BE THE HOT HALLOWEEN COSTUME THIS YEAR, OR WILL SOMEONE GO AS THE TITULAR *DINNER TO DIE FOR*?

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DREAD

For starters, we at DREAD are currently in production on a film called *Florida Man*, in which a fanatical alligator worshipping cult ascertains some much-needed human sacrifices in the form of unlucky teenagers. I love a cult flick, and there's plenty of inspiration in that subgenre, from *The Wicker Man* to *The Sacrament*. Maybe I can be a cult leader or an alligator?

Maybe I'll follow in the footsteps of rapper and horror junkie Tyga and go as the Jester! As it stands, my October is already consumed by all things Jester for the release of DREAD's *The Jester 2*. What started as a series of short films (that have now accumulated over 30 million views) is now turning into a popular franchise. After the viral success of the first film, I'm stoked for more and more people to continue to discover it. You can catch it at home on October 17th. Though it might be awkward to show up in the same costume as Tyga. So let's keep searching...

Maybe something more... appetizing? I'm thinking of a sexy culinary thriller called *Dinner To Die For*, that's coming from our friends at Chroma (hi, Ahbra!). It's the first feature from Diana Mills Smith. Keep an eye out for this one coming December 2025. I'm excited for everything Chroma's got cooking. Pun intended.

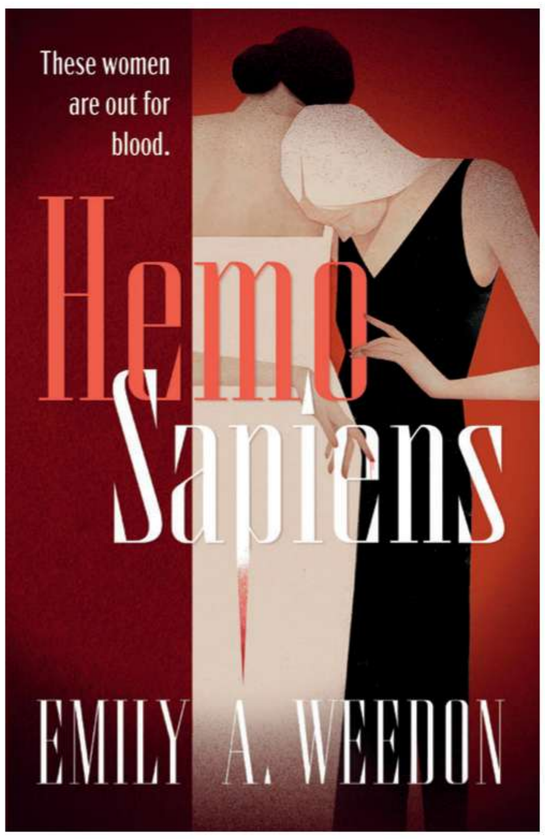
Maybe we should look to one of those classy foreign films for an obscure pull that's both classy and heady. Unfortunately, that's not the movie I'm thinking of. All I can think of is *Chainsaws Were Singing*, an Estonian film I caught at the Fantasia Film Festival last year; it's basically a required watch. I could say more here, but there's a whole article over on page 49.

Welp. I've done my job. I've successfully highlighted some exciting indie genre fare for you to enjoy this spooky season, but I still need to figure out this costume situation. If you've got any suggestions, give me a shout on socials @DreadPresents and @_yulissamora.

Until then, wishing you a most horrifying Halloween! 💀

NIGHTMARE LIBRARY

BY AHLISSA EICHHORN



HEMO SAPIENS

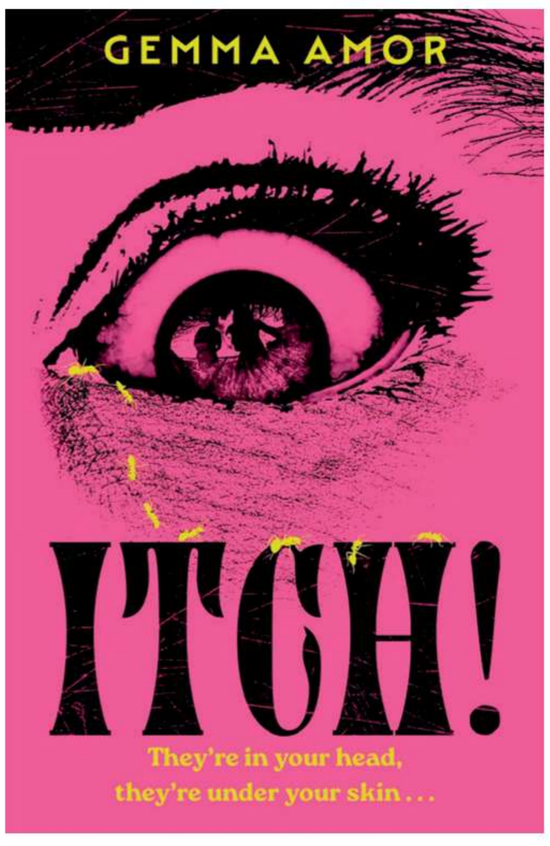
DUE OUT:
9/30/2025

AUTHOR:
Emily A. Weedon

PUBLISHER:
Dundurn Press

Detective Luke Stockton is burning the candle at both ends. His latest homicide case involves a puzzling pattern of exsanguinated young men. At home, he supports his wife Beatrice the best he can as she prepares for the arrival of their first child. Things get complicated once evidence leads to a woman named Cleo, the enigmatic owner of a boutique medspa famous for its vampire facials and leech treatments. It's also the same spa of which Beatrice has become a newly devoted member. Now that his home life and work have collided, Luke is sent headfirst into a lair of secret species and ancient callings.

Hemo Sapiens shifts the vampire subgenre to its maternal side. In this world, vampirism is sisterhood, and pregnancy is an honorable cause for slaughter. Weedon draws parallels between the two with equal measures of provocation and humor. Luke's investigation is the main artery from which several storylines branch, but he isn't the focus. His perspective provides the necessary patriarchal contrast to the themes at work. Classic vampire motifs are subdued and replaced with other anatomical curiosities. But don't be fooled – they still have bite. This story will appeal to readers who like their supernatural a bit scientific and grounded in a tangible reality. Driven by feminine power and autonomy, *Hemo Sapiens* offers a fresh, cunning take as it goes beyond mere sustenance to consider the other biological needs of monsters. Blood may be the life, but the body is so much more interesting.



ITCH!

DUE OUT:
10/09/2025

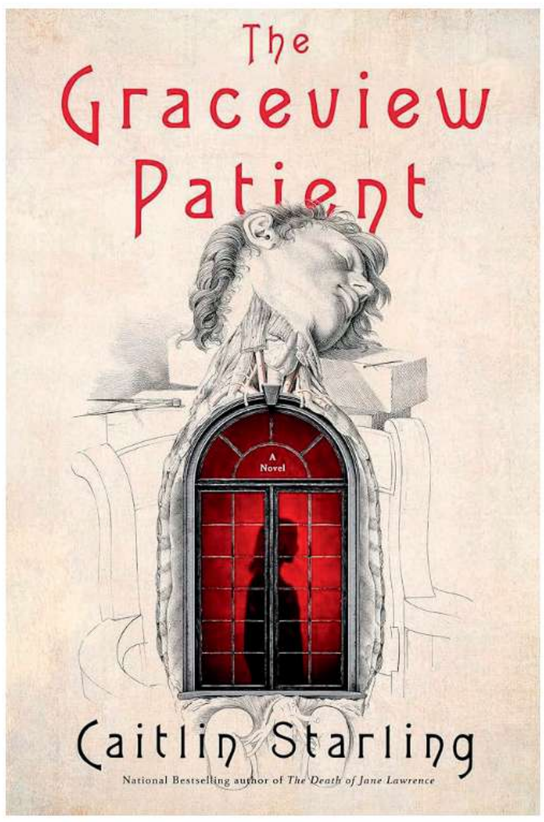
AUTHOR:
Gemma Amor

PUBLISHER:
Hodder & Stoughton

Recovery and a fresh start are exactly what Josie needs after a violent breakup. Her best bet is returning to Ellwood, her home village, to begin anew. It may be stuck in the past, but at least it's consistent, stable – until she stumbles upon a woman's ant-infested corpse on a familiar trail. This traumatic discovery triggers a spiral in Josie. She can't stop thinking about the woman, and she can't stop *itching*. Something crawled its way inside her and it may just be the ants living beneath her skin – possessing her to find answers before another body is found.

Itch! seems like a standard crime thriller on paper, but its folk horror backdrop quickly inverts the tone. A pervasive sense of evil and mourning create the perfect atmosphere for its disturbing visuals. No detail is too small about the insects; readers will become beyond intimate with the unholy sensations they cause. They can also expect more supernatural elements. The mystery is engaging, yet the complexity lies with Josie herself. These pests personify her anxiety by way of beautiful, merciless prose. Having her body hijacked is the key to finally trusting her intuition and living in her own skin. *Itch!* will mess with your senses more than a night in a forest. It's a nerve-wracking tale of surreal suffering. Built from mystery and mythology, it's strong enough to support serious themes with a harsh, poignant payoff.

WHERE THERE'S HORROR, THERE'S USUALLY A BODY. IT CAN BE DEAD, ROTTING, OR RESURRECTED. IT CAN BE TRANSFORMED OR DISFIGURED. It's a weapon. And sometimes, it's not even human. This latest selection of nasty novels tests the thresholds of the bodily vessel and the unspeakable things of which it's capable.



THE GRACEVIEW PATIENT

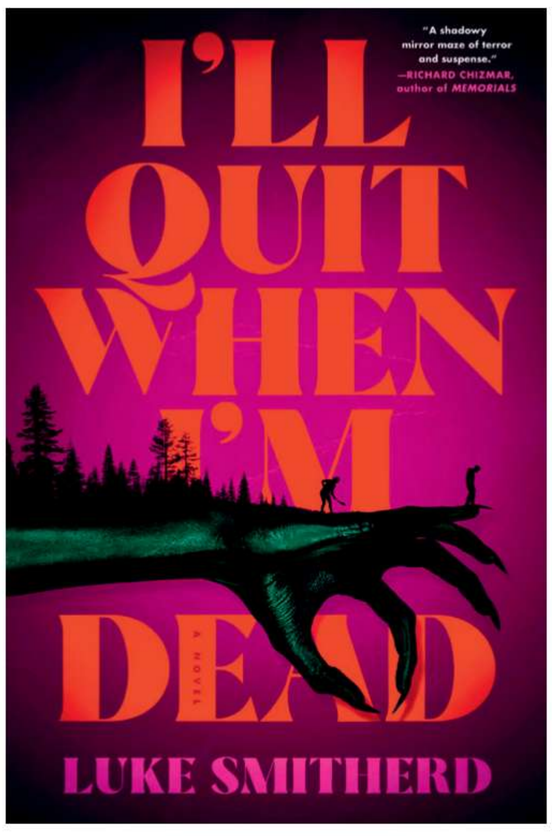
DUE OUT:
10/14/2025

AUTHOR:
Caitlin Starling

PUBLISHER:
St. Martin's Press

Margaret Culpepper is at the mercy of a chronic illness called Fayette Gehret Syndrome. In a last-ditch effort to gain back quality of life, she agrees to an experimental treatment at Graceview Hospital. The pain of the treatment is extraordinary as her immune system is slowly destroyed and rebuilt. While wasting away in her hospital bed, she notices a growing presence in the building. She can hear its murmur and soon, she can begin to see it. Is she actually recovering? Or is she succumbing to what lives inside the aged walls?

The medical world is elusive by nature, but *The Graceview Patient* lays the mystery on thicker and freakier. Readers get to know Margaret only through her confusion and discomfort, infusing the whole story with a nervous energy. The legitimacy of her interactions with staff and other patients is debatable, but her perseverance in a fight for wellness and dignity elicits deep empathy. Fans of *Jacob's Ladder* will devour the air of uncertainty the story exudes. The haunted hospital trope is scary enough, but Starling's dark sci-fi style transforms it into a hellscape of gooey terror and nosophobia. Strong imagery of needle use, open sores, and bodily slime give the story a grimy edge. A mean and moody medical horror, *The Graceview Patient* spotlights the tragedy of chronic illness and the predatory practices of a flawed healthcare system.


"A shadowy mirror maze of terror and suspense."
—RICHARD CHIZMAR, author of MEMORIALS
I'LL QUIT WHEN I'M DEAD
A NOVEL
LUKE SMITHERD

I'LL QUIT WHEN I'M DEAD

DUE OUT:
10/14/2025

AUTHOR:
Luke Smitherd

PUBLISHER:
Mulholland Books

I'll Quit When I'm Dead follows Madison, a young woman who is sick of being weak, scared, and directionless. She joins No Days Off, an extreme fitness camp that pushes your mental and physical boundaries. Its founder is Ellie, a combat veteran who might be the kind of mentor Madison needs. Something is a bit off about No Days Off, but she carries on, ignoring her survival instincts screaming for her to stop. All the while, musician Johnny Blake is fighting his personal addiction to pills, accidentally falling into a frightening dimension called The Shallows.

Observing the progressive torment of Madison and Johnny is tense, sadistic entertainment. You feel their stress increasing each grueling step of the way with every drop of sweat and blood spattered across the page. The slippery villains and their tricky courses of action give the protagonists opportunities to be very authentic, relatable characters. Johnny endures wastelands and monsters keen on his relapse while Madison is in a dangerous stand-off where mind games are the norm. The concept of punishing the body to make the brain yield is both troubling and stimulating. Ironically, *I'll Quit When I'm Dead* is addictive in its own way as an unexpected horror-thriller duet that promises you transformation and coerces you onto a ledge of insane, eye-popping choices. Before committing, ask yourself what you're willing to do to escape your personal hell.

Contributors' Crypt

Follow our talented roster of contributors on social media! Be polite, you animals.

Sean Abley ..... @gay_of_the_dead
Meredith Borders ..... @mereborders
BJ Colangelo ..... @bjcolangelo
Barbara Crampton .. @barbaracrampton
Ahlissa Eichhorn .. @hauntedbydeadlines
Amelia Emberwing ..... @thatwitchmia
Isaac Feldberg ..... @ijfeldberg
Xero Gravity ..... @xghorror
Stephen Graham Jones ..... @stephengrahamjones
Kimberly Leszak ..... @crazysexyghoul
Yulissa Morales ..... @_yulissamora
Richard Newby ..... @rnewb
Ryan Scott ..... @ryanscottwrites
Brandon Streussnig ..... @brandon_streussnig
Vannah Taylor ..... @sirendeathcult
Tony Timpone .....@timponetony
Michael Varrati .....@michaelvarrati

Things to Come

FANGORIA #30 rings in 2026 with a roster of old faves up to new tricks: Bryan Fuller reunites with HANNIBAL's Mads Mikkelsen for DUST BUNNY; Kevin Williamson steps into the director's chair for SCREAM 7; Nia DaCosta takes us to THE BONE TEMPLE; and Mike P. Nelson's SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT resurrects a disreputable classic. And that's just scratching the surface — the new year is jam-packed with horror, and our winter issue is there!

CLASSIFIED AD VAULT

Our dear Sammy and Bear, Mum and Dad miss you so much. Thank you for all your love. Always our boys, Amanda and Mark

Hi from Ireland :)

Hey Dude, don't make it bad. Take your hairball and make a sweater.

To Fran — Thanks for making me the Wednesday to your (v blonde) Morticia! Love, Kimberly

Shoutout to the entire team at The Datfeelin Podcast Network (http://thedfpn.com) for holding it down with great content and for all the support they've provided me since beginning my YT journey! http://youtube.com/@CJLovesHorror

MARY'S LAKE – Award-winning indie horror. DVDs at MAWilliamsFilms.com. Follow us for new films, festivals & convention dates.

SHADES OF SPOOKS AND SCARES; A COLORING BOOK OF THE MACABRE. 25 spooky images to resurrect with your own colorful creativity. Available now at jasonwattsbooks.ca.

Be excellent to each other.

Love and kisses to my darling wife Sophie. from Sheridan Xxxx

Human Artist Seeking Consenting Horror Fans For Commissions (IG: @laptoplasane.art)

Would you live with killer ghosts to save on rent? See how far some would go in EVIL SUBLET! 98% on the Rotten Tomatoes Popcornmeter! Watch on Tubi: bit.ly/eviltubi

"Very funny & truly terrifying… Movie score: 10/10" -Bobby LePire, Film Threat

Get the newly released Danish horror novel, LAWRENCE & JACK, by Frederik Jensen, now!

All Hail Emperor Spontanateus!

To the dads who shaped us, indulged us, encouraged us, molded us and made us.

Check out my instagram page @fan.goria_collector, check out every single issue of every FANGORIA magazine

I'd like to shout out the horror community on social media. They're always so loving and supportive to one another and surely know how to welcome new friends with open arms. I'm grateful for this space that I have found and for the friends I've made along the way. Here's to many more @zalaween :)!

Check out Spooky Doings! We perform improv in NYC, host trivia on Long Island & our podcast is available on Apple & Podbean. Horror & humor in many forms.

Sid Haig, As another year goes by without you here, let this be a small tribute of the light you always brought into our worlds. Forever our Captain. Forever loved. Forever our friend. Your Murder Ride Fam, Living Dead Girl Nicole & Frank

Latest Addition to Our Family Library
New Release: *Future Monster Kid* (Second Edition)
Title: Annabel Róisín
Specifications: 7lbs 4oz, published 8.21
Genre: International, Pure Magic
This highly anticipated debut and cutest plot twist ever draws inspiration from beloved family classics and Mama's cherished Poe collection. Early reviews describe it as "absolutely perfect" and "impossible to put down." *Currently available for unlimited story time.*

Last month sweet boy Pepe the pug had a serious injury and my wife and I didn't know if he was going to make it. After surgery, a lot of rest and recovery, Pepe is back and maybe better than before! The outreach from friends, family and especially the horror community was truly amazing. As I'm writing this, Pepe is snoring in his lil bed next to my desk as I wrap up this issue of Fango. Thank you to everyone that reached out and supported us and Pepe. -JK & AV & Pepe 🐶

Big Fango announcement coming at the end of this month! Keep those peepers peeled.

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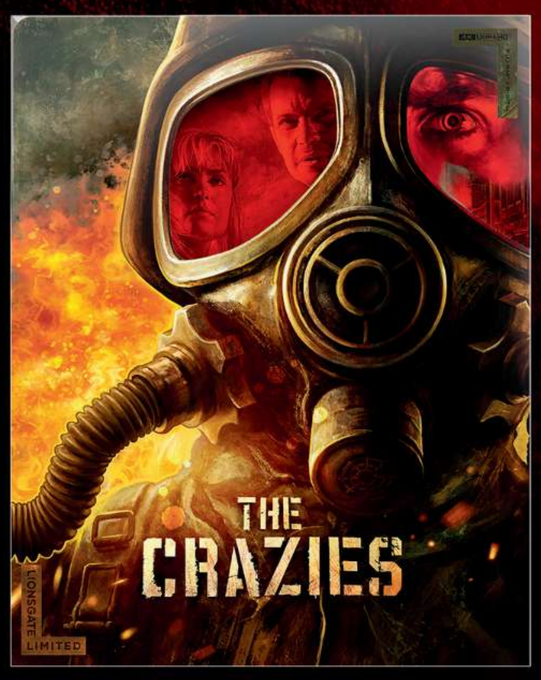

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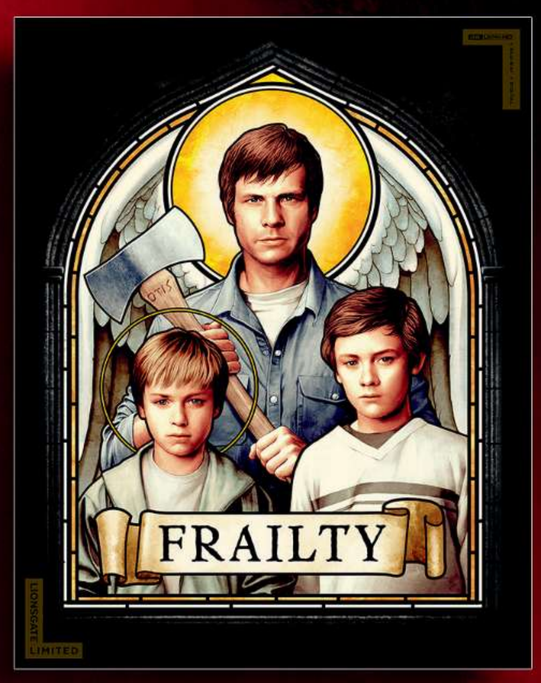

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